HALLOW HOME

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On behalf of the mods; we thank every single one of you for your participation and interest in this zine. From the artists, the writers, all of the applicants, and the supporters.

Without you, this project would have not become reality.

Let our journey across Hallownest begin!

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"Be the person you would like to meet. If our life is but a spark in the eyes of gods, let's blind them at least once."
- Samu

The Stag’s Code

“Little ones! I will bring you a story this rest.”

The rough voice of the Tunnelmaster billowed through the nest like the cloud of grit that followed a running stag, beckoning forth a stampede of tiny feet. A pair of great horns pushed a path through silken tapestries, until at last the grandest stag within the kingdom lay before them. The quaking that heeded his steps did nothing to deter the swarm of young stags, clinking their budding horns with his in a familiar, persistent greeting.

The Tunnelmaster’s laugh was a thunderstorm on the horizon, rolling with mirth and sparking interest along the way. With one great sweep of his weathered claws, a few lucky stags found themselves with the high honor of sitting in his grasp. The smallest of them was even graced by the Tunnelmaster’s beard, the beginning of his story muffled by the soft feather-tails as he shook them from his head.

“...Listen close, and I will tell you how the Great Stag rolled the Sun out of the sky...”

It was this tale that still echoed in the back of the old stag's mind, however muffled by beard it may have been. The Tunnelmaster's –

No, his *own* feathered beard fell from his cheek as he finally lifted his head from the dirt… and drank in the stale tunnel air.

It must have been many years since the Great Stag rolled the Sun from the Sky, for certainly no outside light had warmed these tunnels for quite some time. The old stag awoke to a dim darkness, fended off bravely by a garland of clouded lumafly lanterns. Ever incandescent, ever incessant in their duty. …Were they, too, aware of the emptiness of the tunnels or the vastness of the nest? The old stag did not know, as he lowered his head to nudge at one that had fallen. Even marred by dirt, the little creature fluttered inside in its auric duty.

Once, the old stag may have had the broken lantern hitched to his saddle to honor the fastidiousness of the lumafly inside. Just as it had kept its vigil over the tunnels, so too would he keep a vigil over it, until its glass shell could be mended.

But a stag’s gear was meant to be changed with helping hands. Never did they forsee a future where one could end up alone.

Instead, he picked up the muddy handle between his mandibles instead and set it gently below its fellows. This was the first lesson a young stag learned, after all:

The stagways are our kin. Maintain them as you do your own gear: with the highest care and honor.

He had been on a journey, he recalled in bleary memory, as his joints creaked with protest when he began his pace again. The little one– the little knight had been so kind as to direct him to all of the stag stations that had been lost to him. With every chime of the bell, he had been ushered closer to his old ways.

But these stations, however dear, were not his home.

No; the heart of a stag would always long for the comfort of the Nest… If only the radiant haze hovering over the kingdom didn't seep into his mind and cloud his memory.

A stag’s place is in the nest. Should you leave her burrows, your heart may never be content until your return.

It was in no recent memory that the old stag found his way forward, but in the tales of his youth. To a great stag, drawn maps were akin to the scribblings of a grub. To learn the stagways was to learn the nest in all of her entirety: by weary claw and thunderous gait. *Never* would a stag find the nest’s soul bound by ink and quill–

Yet, the old stag found himself longing for a guide, as he turned upon yet another barren corridor. The fog of his breath joined the suspended dust and grit, barely illuminated by the last string of lanterns above…

That is, until he heard the softest scrape of six claws against stone from up ahead. Muffled greatly by the weight of stone, but–

He had to be sure.

The old stag lowered his head, beard brushing away the soft dirt at his feet.

Waiting.

Listening.

Hoping–

Krrrr-tch!

The old stag surged into action, barreling down the forgotten tunnels. Step after clawed-forth step, the old stag forged, scratching mark, and divet, and great wound into the tunnel around him. She would have to forgive him, he hoped; the tunnel, the nest– She would have to forgive this harm. But he could hear them just ahead, just beyond the next bed. He may cause a collision, he knew. In his earlier days, he would have balked at the thought of entering an exit tunnel– but for the first time he found a prayer to the White Lady's fortune nagging at the back of his mind. Let him see them let him find them. Let him –

The old stag careened to a stop before a great blockade of boulders and rubble.

The final ascent to Stagnest had caved in.

Yet another barricade separating him from his kin.

The old Stag's breath froze within his lungs as he plunged his horns into the cobbled wall, and sent the rubble toppling down the Stagway, The blunt, clinking chimes of a bell long discarded snapped his frayed attention as it clanged down the path below. He waited, with antennae pricked and limbs tense, but a second ring never came. For that was the third code, after all:

A Stag must always heed the toll of the bell. When the graceless mechanisms fail, the nest will turn to us.

The Tunnelmaster’s voice echoed clear in his head as he continued forth, locking his horns beneath the next boulder, and then the next, and the next again. He could feel the rough stone scratching into his chitin, feel the tip of his horn chip away with each fervent thrust forward – but it mattered not. It mattered not to him if he could forsake that early code, only in favor of the last, most revered tenet:

A stag’s family is the Nest.

The old stag’s knees shook with strain as he hew rock from rubble, sending a cascade of stones past his aching claws and into the darkness behind him.

No matter how you bicker, you must always remember your bond.

Another flurry of bells chimed their last in the wake of his desperation,

Never should a stag go without the help of their kin.

“HAIL!” The old stag boomed the very moment his muzzle broke through the rock wall, all but hurling himself through the first breach he could carve. From the crumbling stone he wrought a path, squirming, wriggling like a nymph coming out of a molt to fit himself through that sliver of salvation. He was certain his fellows’ voices were drowned out by the falling grit; he could envision the commotion he was causing, as he broke through what seemed like an intentional blockade against the light that plagued the nest. But he *needed* to get through. He needed to see them again, his family, his kin, his *home*–

The old stag burst free with a great torrent of pebbles, breaths heaving as he tipped his chin upwards, mandibles parting in a grin to proclaim his return to–

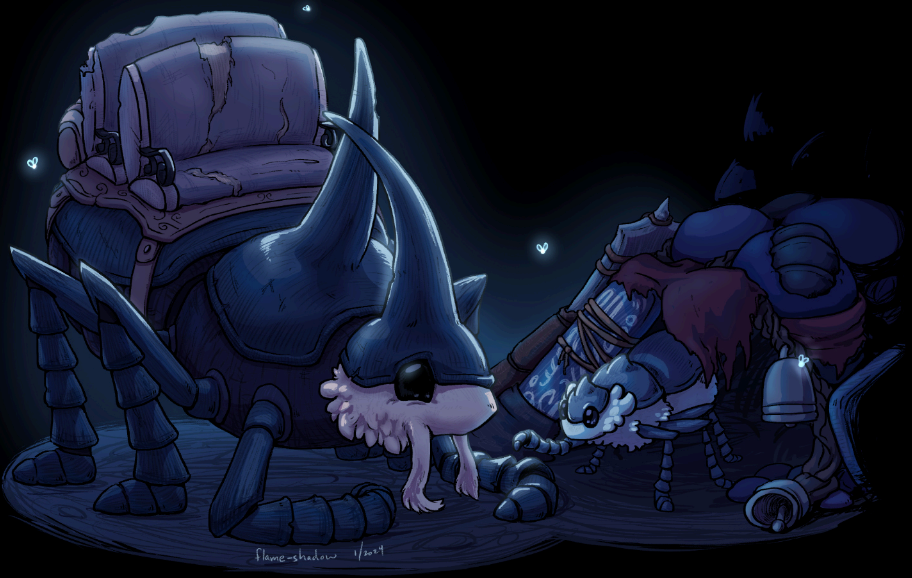
The old stag's heart lurched to his throat, as he drank in the stagnant tunnel air.

–To no one.

The stagnant silence of an empty nest was all that awaited the old stag. Even the howl of the wind dared not lift above a whisper, dancing through the cliffs ever on, as they...

…As his kin lay dead before him.

To move a single step forward took all of the old stag's remaining strength-- and yet, he took another. He could feel his exhaustion catching up to him as adrenaline faded into cold…*nothingness*. A deep, swallowing numbness that devoured him from the inside out, wrenching his very heart from his shell and shoving it into his hoarse throat. He could barely swallow past it as his gaze scanned the sea of discarded bells and saddles before him, gear once so very well-maintained like his own.



SPOT ART BY: Flame-Shadow

Perhaps... they were elsewhere? The old stag's mind lingered on the possibility, but the shake in his limbs said otherwise. This was it, he believed, as his gaze lowered to the toppled signpost that once marked stagnest's terminal.

He was alone. And he was...

So very, very tired.

Yet, before the old stag could lower himself upon his forelegs, he again heard the scrape of claws. A nearby skitter snapped his attention towards the source--

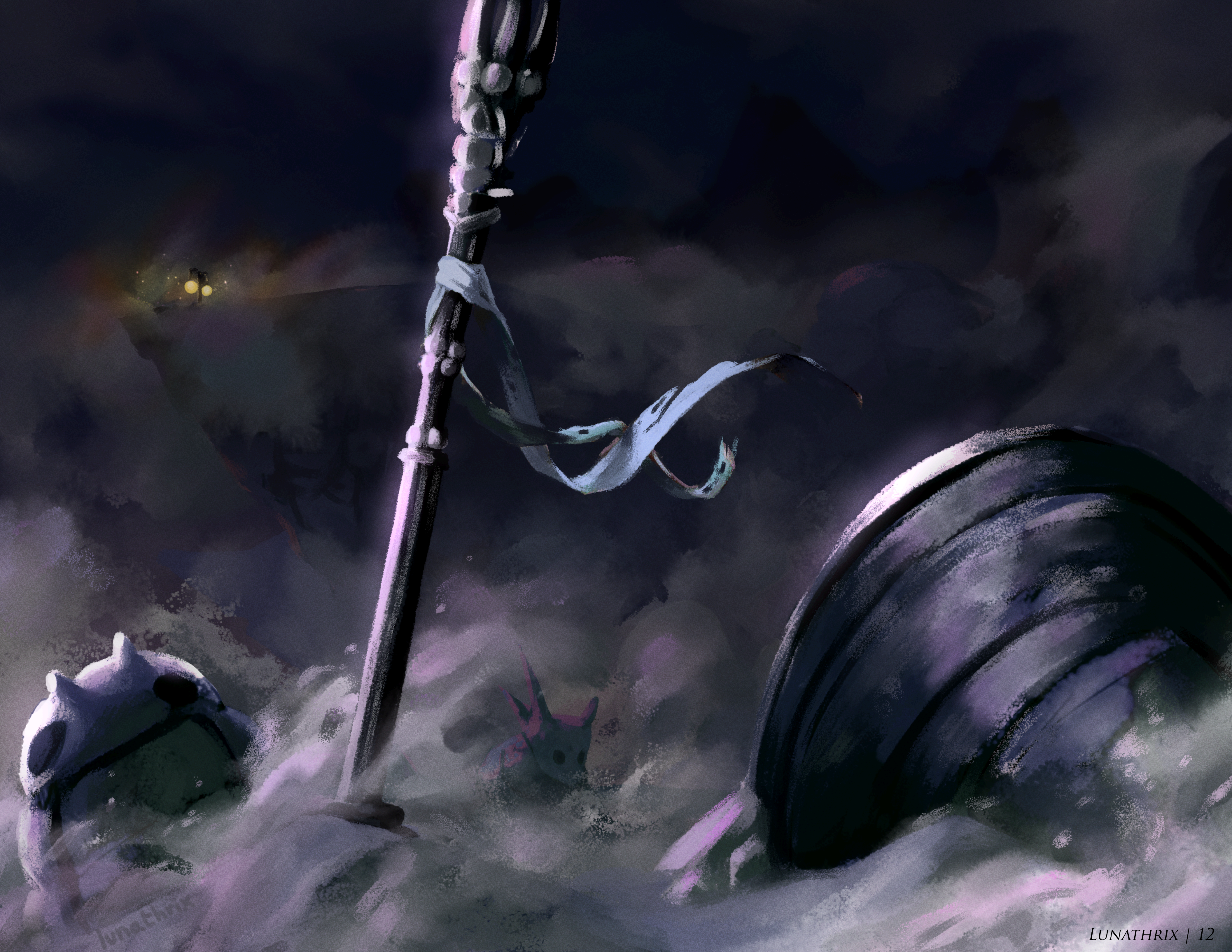
And there, in the darkness, glinted a pair of small, dark eyes.

Forward, the old stag mustered himself, his own claws smothering the tiny prints in the dust, until finally his horn breached past the pair of tattered tapestries… and he lay eyes upon a makeshift burrow. Of bells, and signposts, and maps…

All nestled around the tiny figure of a newly molted stag.

"Little one," the words trembled from his mouth. He extended an arm closer to them, as if to take them in his embrace.

"I have brought you a story."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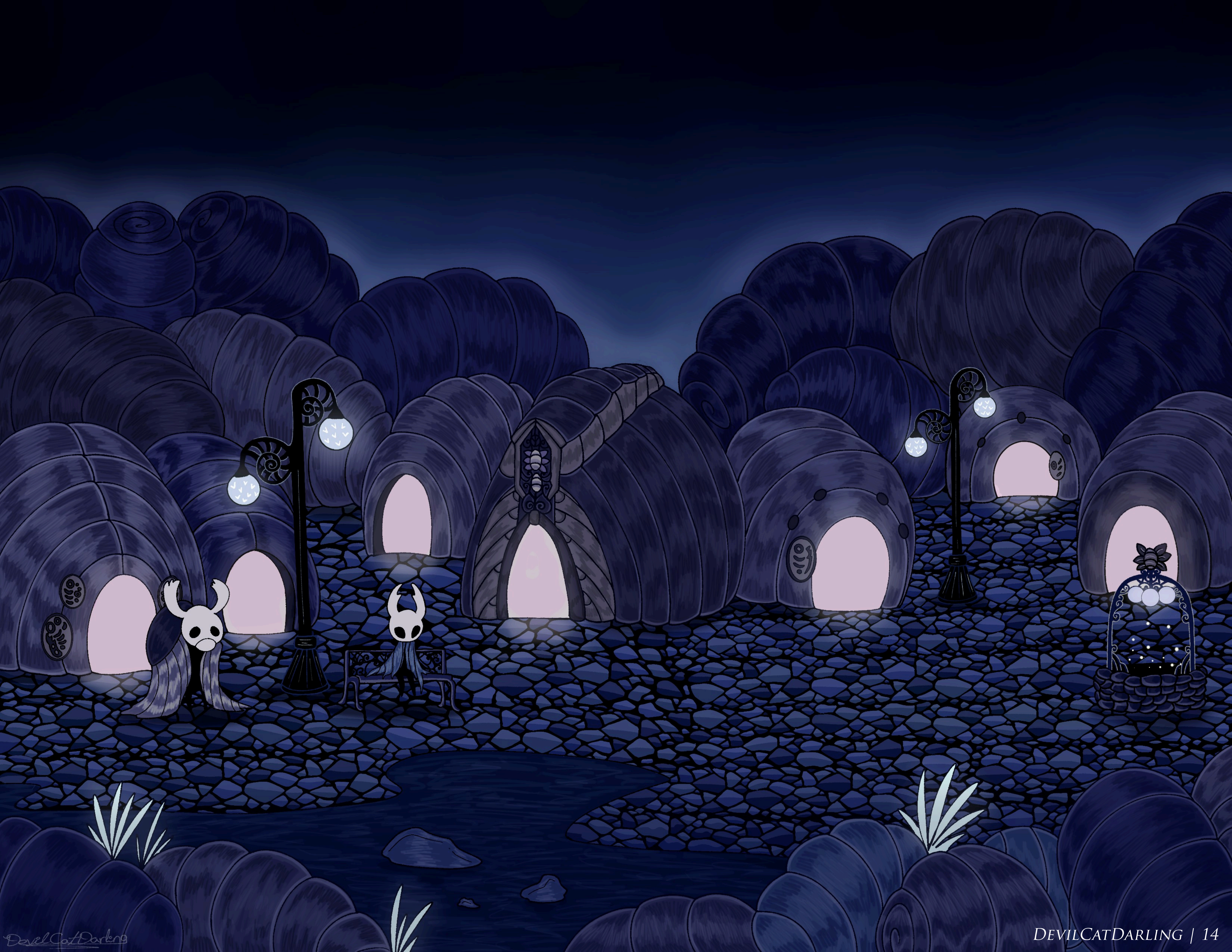

DevilCatDarling

HEN
@henturtlettrpg

PROFESSED ANEW

It was like something out of a dream.

The feel of the pale grass beneath his feet, the curve of the fossils, the cover of rock above his head.

Sly could never forget his old home.

That strange bug had woken him from his haze, but the experience was still surreal.

…He had to get out of here.

* * *

He touched his hand to the base of a familiar sign, looking up. The stag station.

Mato's face was brought forth by his memories, superimposed onto his vision.

> *He jumped up and hovered at Mato's level, placing a hand on the young bug's shoulder.*
>
> *"Mato." The young bug's eyes widened, uncertain. "You did good out there. I'm proud of you."*
>
> *He heard the other gasp. "Really?" At Sly's nod, he found himself snatched out of the air, hugged to Mato's chest. "Master! I- I won't let you down! I won't stop until I become the best Nailmaster I can be, I swear it!"*

Sly's own eyes widened to match his pupil's. He freed his arms and wrapped them around as much of Mato as he could manage. Warmth spread through him, and something deeper still. The thought that his simple words could have such an effect on his pupil…he couldn't have been prouder in this moment to call himself his teacher.

Sly found his hand over his chest as the memory slowly faded.

The memory had happened here, right at the sign. They always returned home this way.

He shook his head to ground himself. The stag station closed long ago.

He had to continue on foot.

* * *

One vengefly fell to the spiked fence post in his hands. The next he thrust forward and skewered.

A goam just so happened to choose that moment to spring up behind it. The makeshift weapon struck its armored shell, giving off a sharp clang, force reverberating through his arms.

The sight of his pupils again filled his vision.

> *"Idiot!" Heavy thwacks of a nail echoed through the cavern. "Clumsy!"*
>
> *"Am not!"*
>
> *Sly didn't know what he would find when he followed the commotion, but Oro whacking away at a goam while Mato circled around him was not it.*
>
> *Before he could even hope to understand the situation, Oro jumped back. He got into stance, nail drawn back, before surging forward with a yell. The goam was struck with force enough to knock it back.*
>
> *"Ooh!!" Sly couldn't help the exclamation. He had never seen Oro perform a nail art so well!*

SPOT ART BY: Vanilly

Oro's head whipped around, freezing up, before looking away with a "tch!"

Mato rushed around the now retreating goam to pick something up from the ground. Looked like the longnail charm he gave all his pupils. Mato never took that off.

Mato looked to Oro and then to him, expectant. Ah. He really should scold Oro for all those insults. But he couldn't help a huge grin. It was hard to chastise the young bug when he used his teachings so well!

Sly rubbed his arms as the memory faded, aching after striking something so hard. The goams had really overtaken the roads in all these years, carving them up. He only had to worry about it a little longer until he got home.

•

He jolted from his nap when a gruzzer ran right into him. He scrambled for his weapon. Even awkward as it was on his back, he managed to strike it in an arc above his head.

The infected blood sprayed out in a similar arc, before falling back to the ground. And onto his face.

First it was Oro and Esmy. Then he himself. Then Mato. Moments before a quiet space, a temporary refuge in the storage area below the lift system, nothing but the sound of Sheo's quill on his journal. Now it was a shouting match, attempts to calm only pulling him into the fray, irritability high after a long day of walking.

Just as he was wondering if it would turn physical, something hit his face. The others too, now splattered in…black?

They all turned.

Sheo sat, arm outstretched, face rapidly turning from anger to guilt. Ink dripped from the quill in his hand.

He lowered his arm, hugging his journal to himself.

"Uh. Crossed my letters too hard."

Sly touched a hand to the ink on his face, hit with the absurdity of it all. He chuckled before bursting out into full laughter, soon joined by the rest of the group.

It was a rare thing indeed to see Sheo embarrassed!

Sly wiped the infected blood from his face.

He really shouldn't be letting himself get so lost in his head. He spent enough time in a haze already.

•

Sly felt the platform under him shift. Turning around, a large bug had appeared over the bottom edge, resting his arms on it.

"Hello there! Didn't mean to disturb you. I'm just on my way back up to the surface." The bug hauled himself up onto the platform. Sly craned his head up to keep eye contact. "Have you been there, to that little town? Just opened a map shop with my wife."

He eyed the pack the bug carried, scrolls spilling from it. A shop? How long had he been out? "Ah? I live there."

"Splendid! Perhaps we'll see each other there soon then?" Without another word, the bug turned around and leapt to the next platform.

Sly watched after him. The bug, so much larger and weighed down by his pack, ascended the defunct lift system with ease, starting up a hum even.

Struck by sudden purpose, he surveyed the room below him. Another shopkeeper in Dirtmouth? He couldn't be slacking! The area was utterly filled with abandoned goods. Surely his eye for appraisal could find *something* in this place of value!

* * *

Poor fool. Another lost to the ruins.

The room's numerous containers had given up nothing, picked over to death by scavengers. But the corpse in front of him carried a grim prize.

Saying some quick words over the dead, he picked it up. He turned it over in his hand, felt its weight, took in the look of it. A warm thrum spread through him, from his arm to the rest of his body. He had a good feeling about this one.

He pinned it on himself.

The effect was immediate. Energy flooded his body. He no longer felt sore. He no longer felt tired. He stood and jumped to the nearest platform, and the next, and the next, with such ease he could scarcely tell the toll of the day's travels. He could almost believe….

He could feel it again. Young, strong, powerful. Just as he used to be.

He zipped up the room, at speeds he hadn't known in centuries.

He'd lived so long, world suspended in time. But nothing could outshine the time before. The power of the nail arts. The glory that came as he rose to become the Great Nailsage.

With a whirl, he felled any gruzzer or tiktik that crossed his path. He would not be slowed.

Taking on pupils. Traveling the world. Nothing could stop him.

He stopped on a platform for a moment, full of memory. A reminder. A haunting.

Esmy. Most adventurous of his pupils. Always forging ahead. Exploring. Keeping the rest of them on their toes. It was all the rest of them could do to keep up.

He continued, a tightness in his chest.

She was to be the next.

His successor. The future Nailsage.

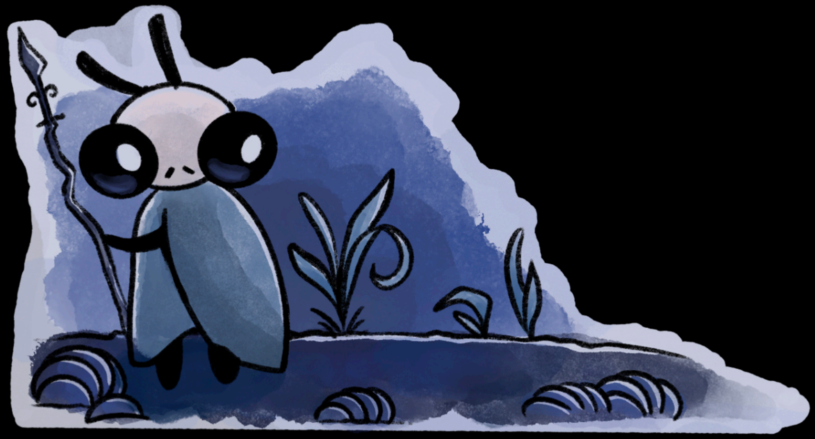
He reached the top of the lifts. The surface so close.

He ran. There was a dampness around his eyes now.

She went deeper, and deeper. Until...

He saw beams of light streaming down from above. The way out. The way home.

And yet…



SPOT ART BY: Vanilly

He looked at the world around him. Hallownest.

He could go on forever like this. Travel the roads again.

Nothing could stop him. He was the Great Nailsage.

…

But he wasn't supposed to be. Not forever.

That future had died long ago, down below.

Looking back up, he spread his wings and ascended.

…Until partway up, heard that voice again, rapidly approaching.

He pressed himself to the side of the well just in time.

"Oh!" The cartographer paused upon spotting him. "Excuse me, didn't expect anyone else in here! Already Hallownest calls, just waiting to be explored. May we meet again soon. Farewell!"

Sly watched after him, until he was gone, with a twinge of annoyance.

Perhaps he should start selling maps?

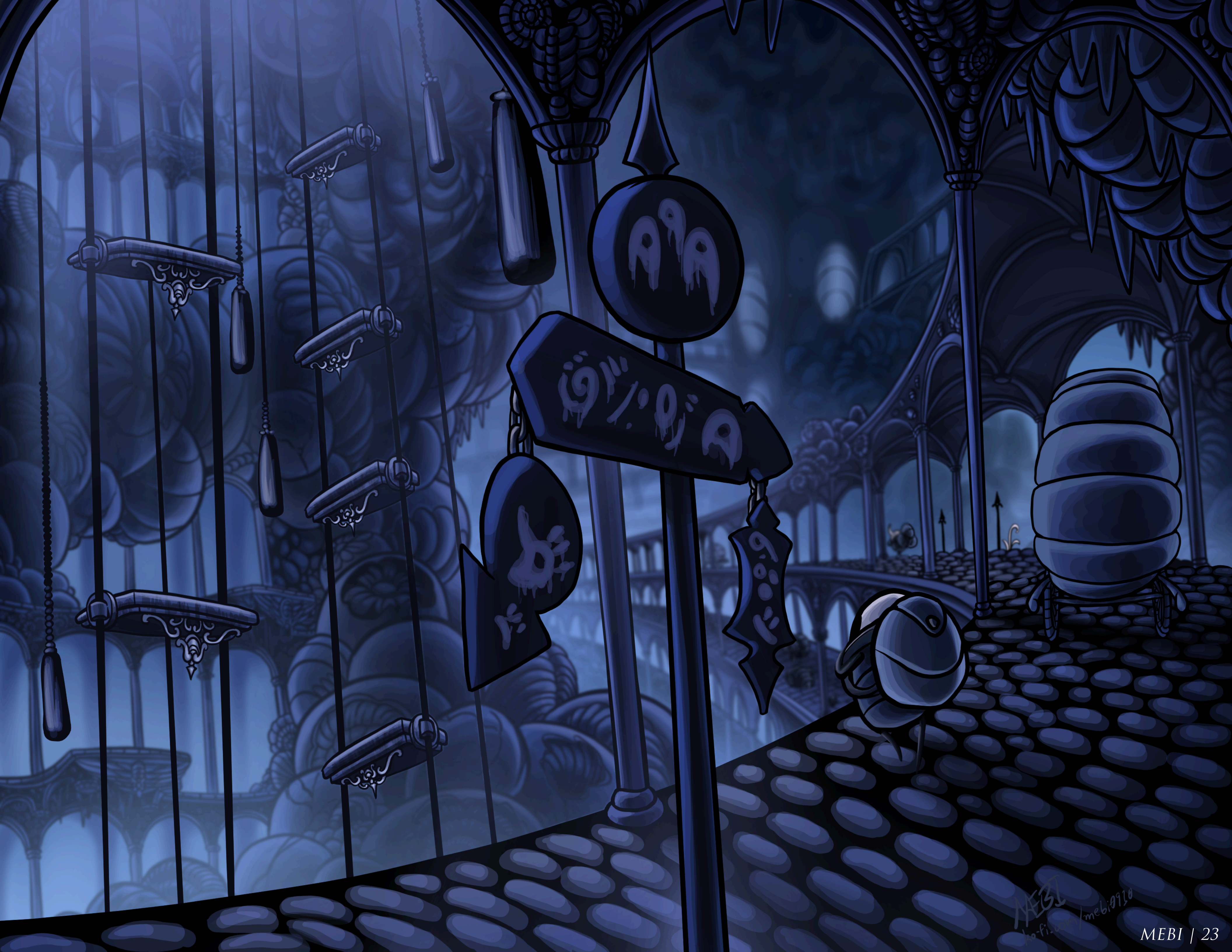
* * *

There, he thought, fixing the display to his liking. All ready for sale. He'd call it sprintmaster, he thought.

It was as it should be.

For all he traveled the roads of Hallownest, he ended up here. He chose it for himself. He did not intend to change that now.

He hoped the same for his pupils, wherever the roads had taken them.



MEBI
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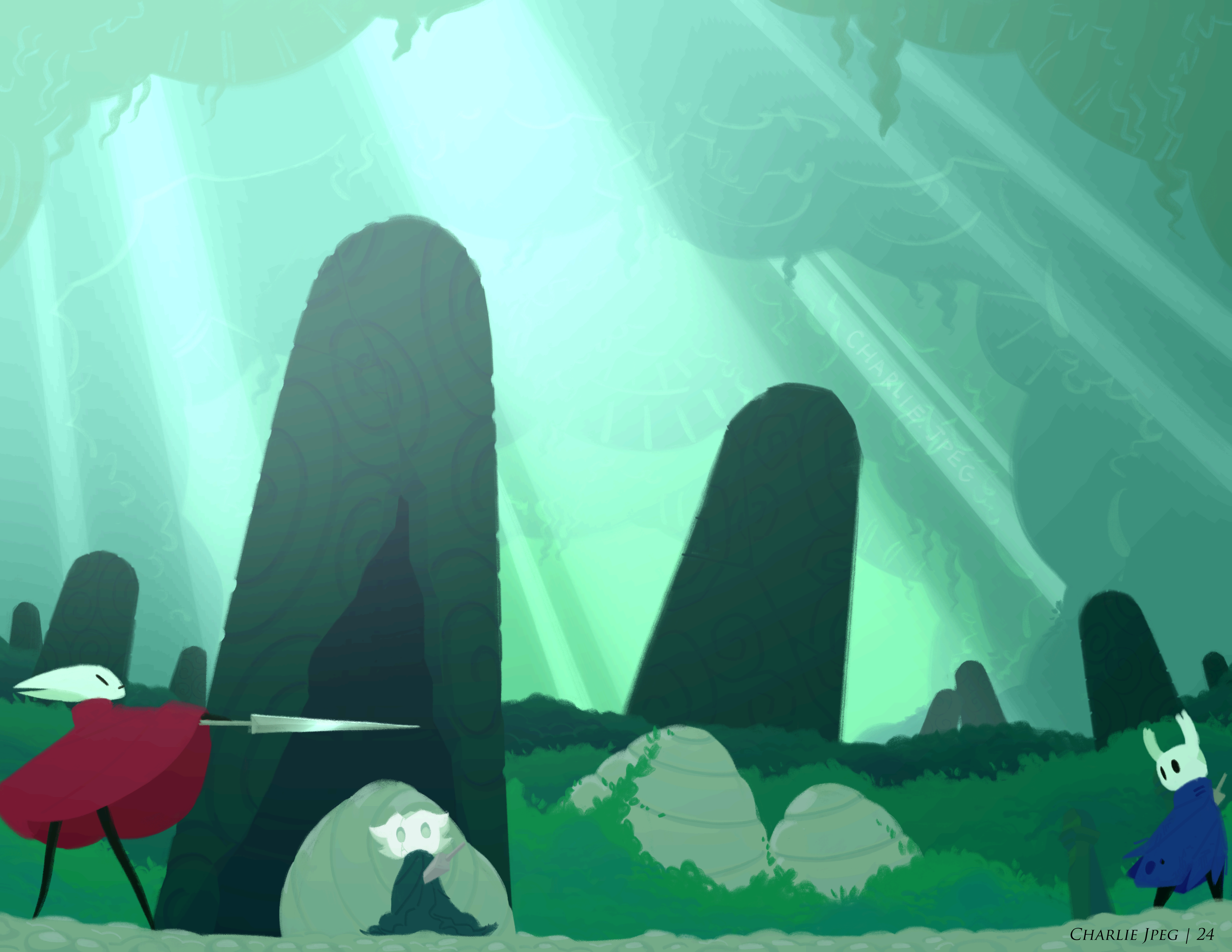

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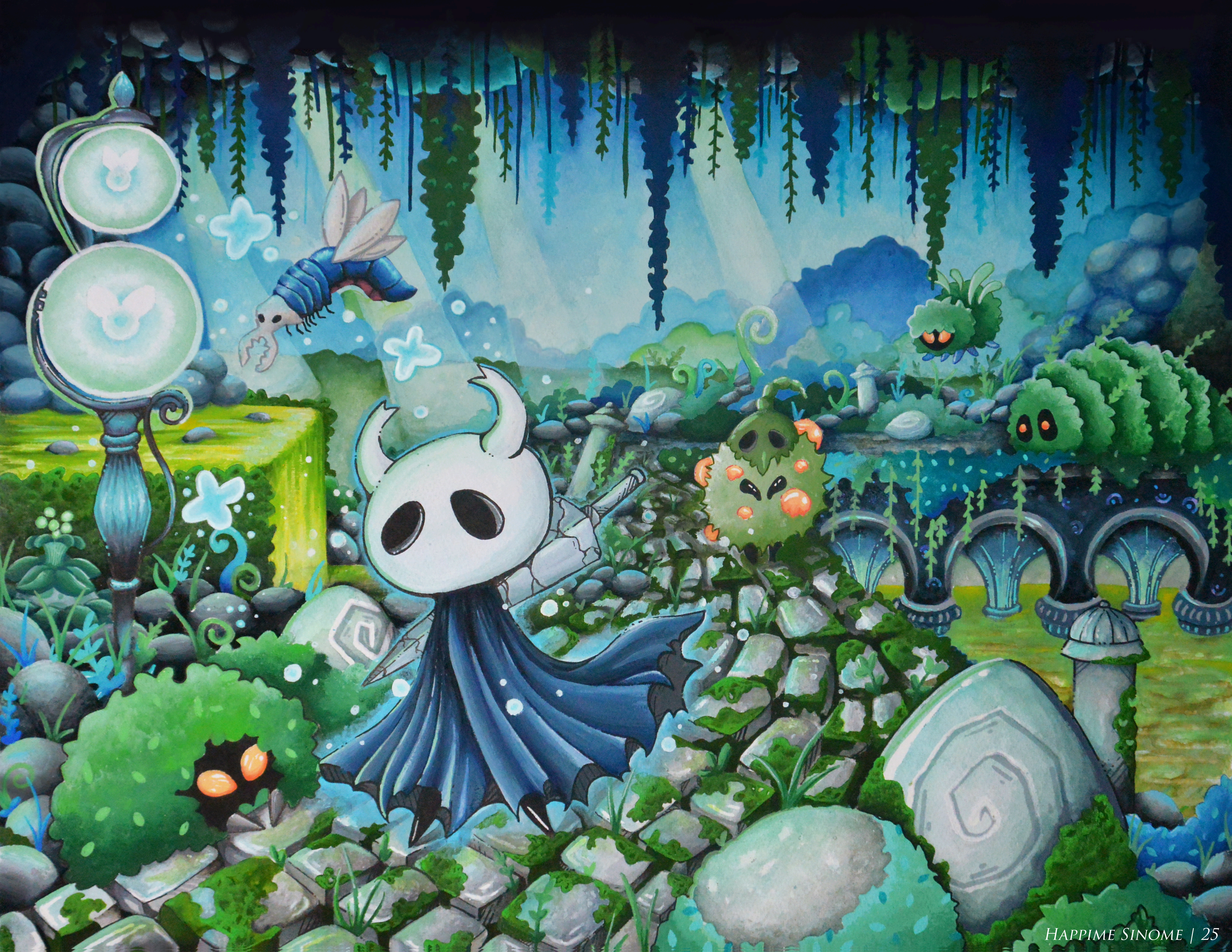

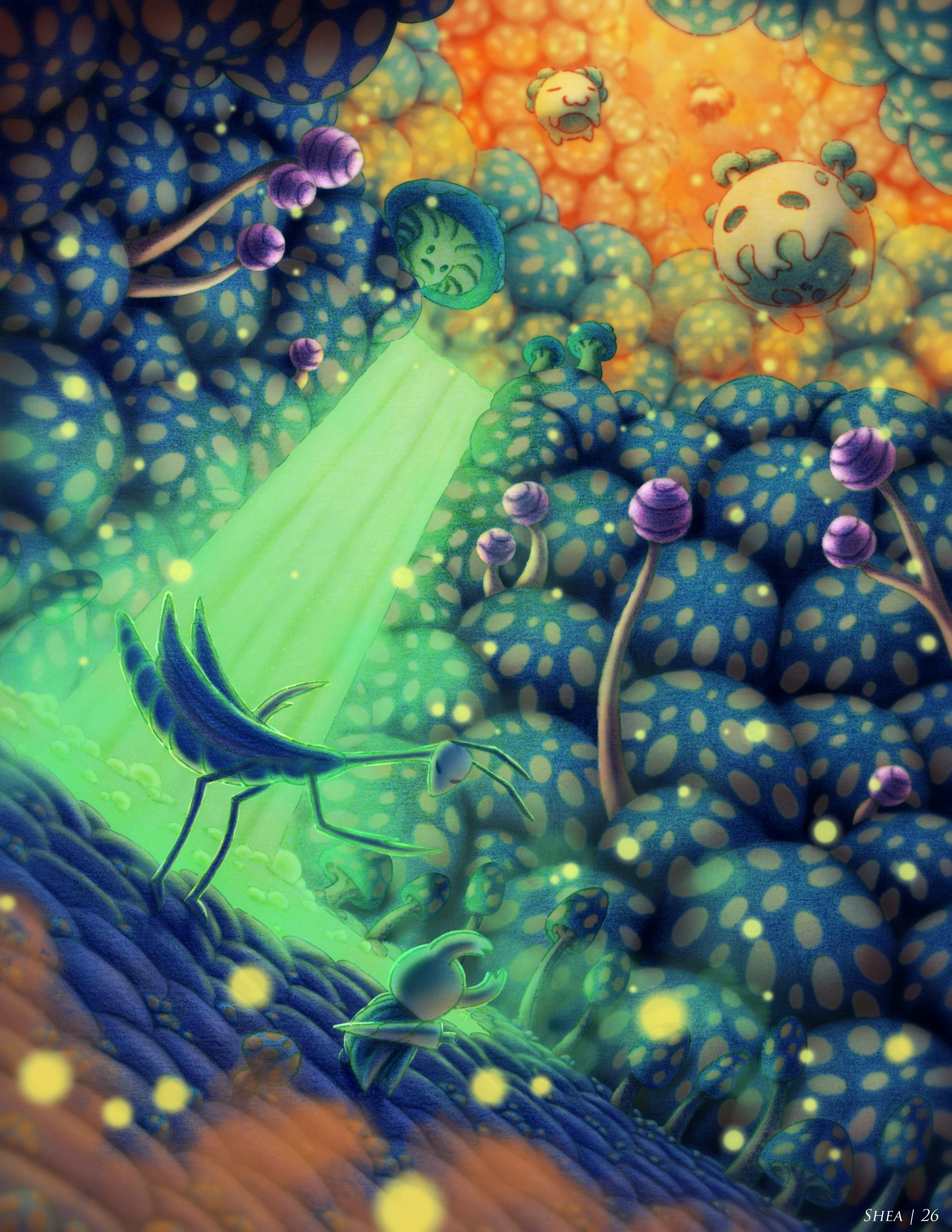

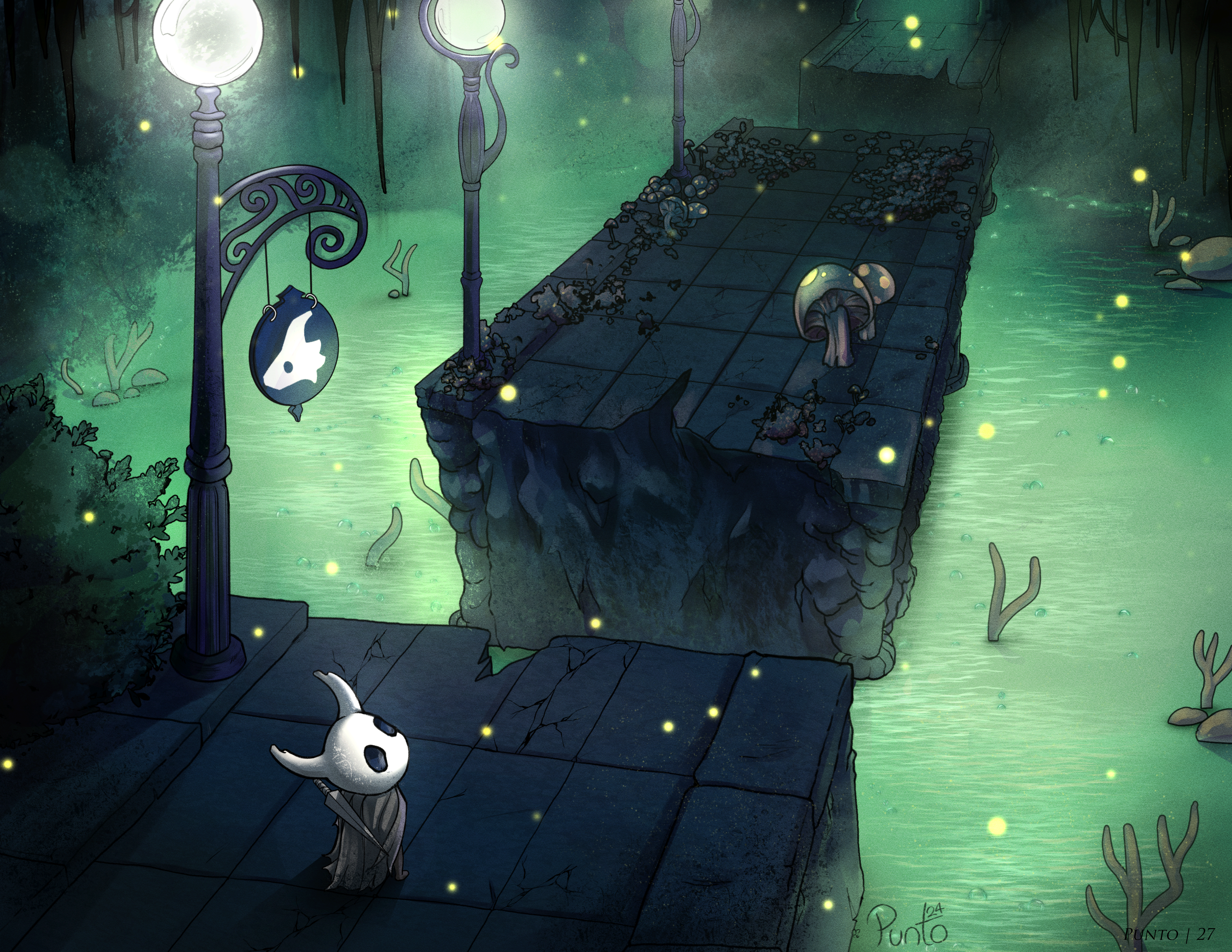
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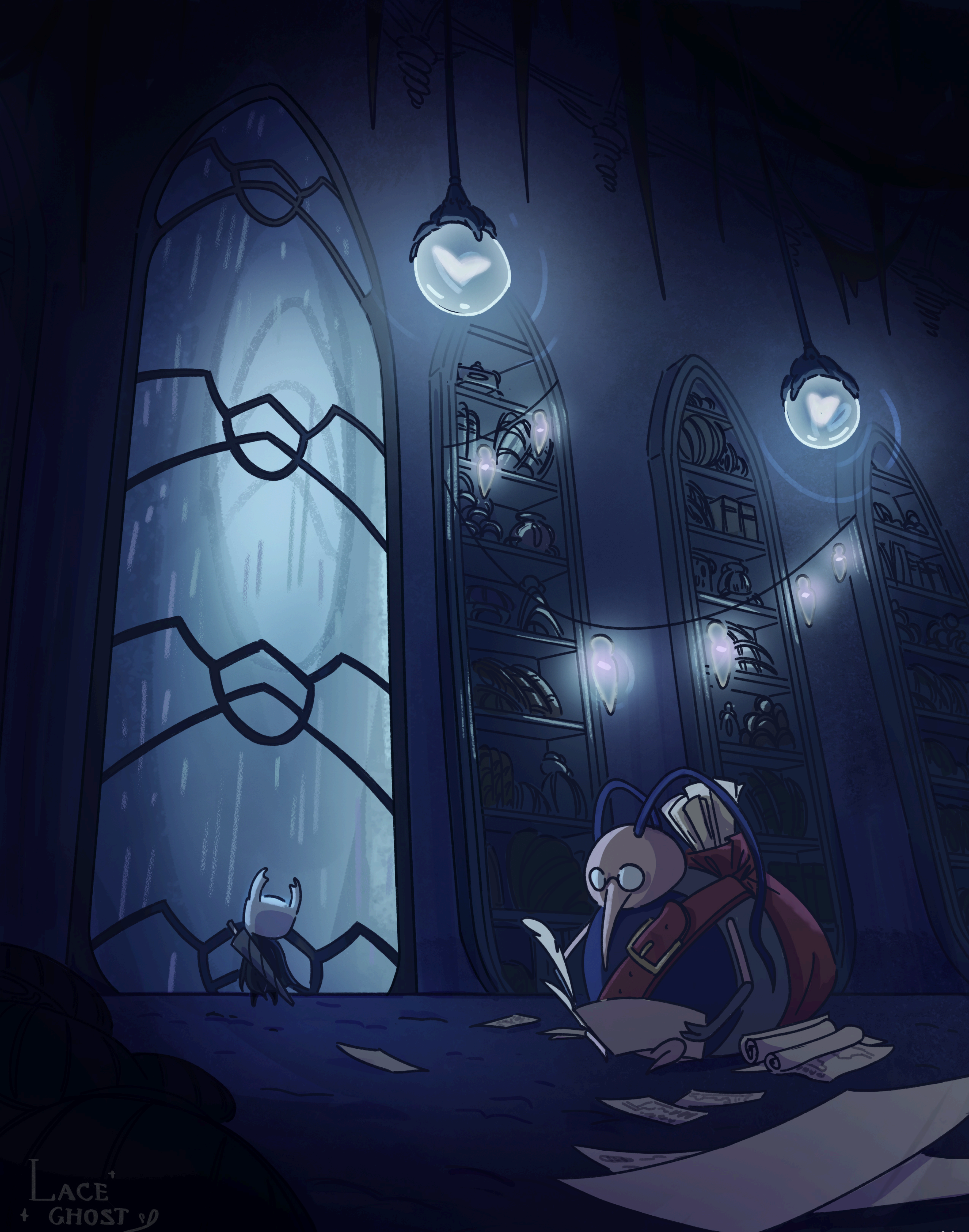
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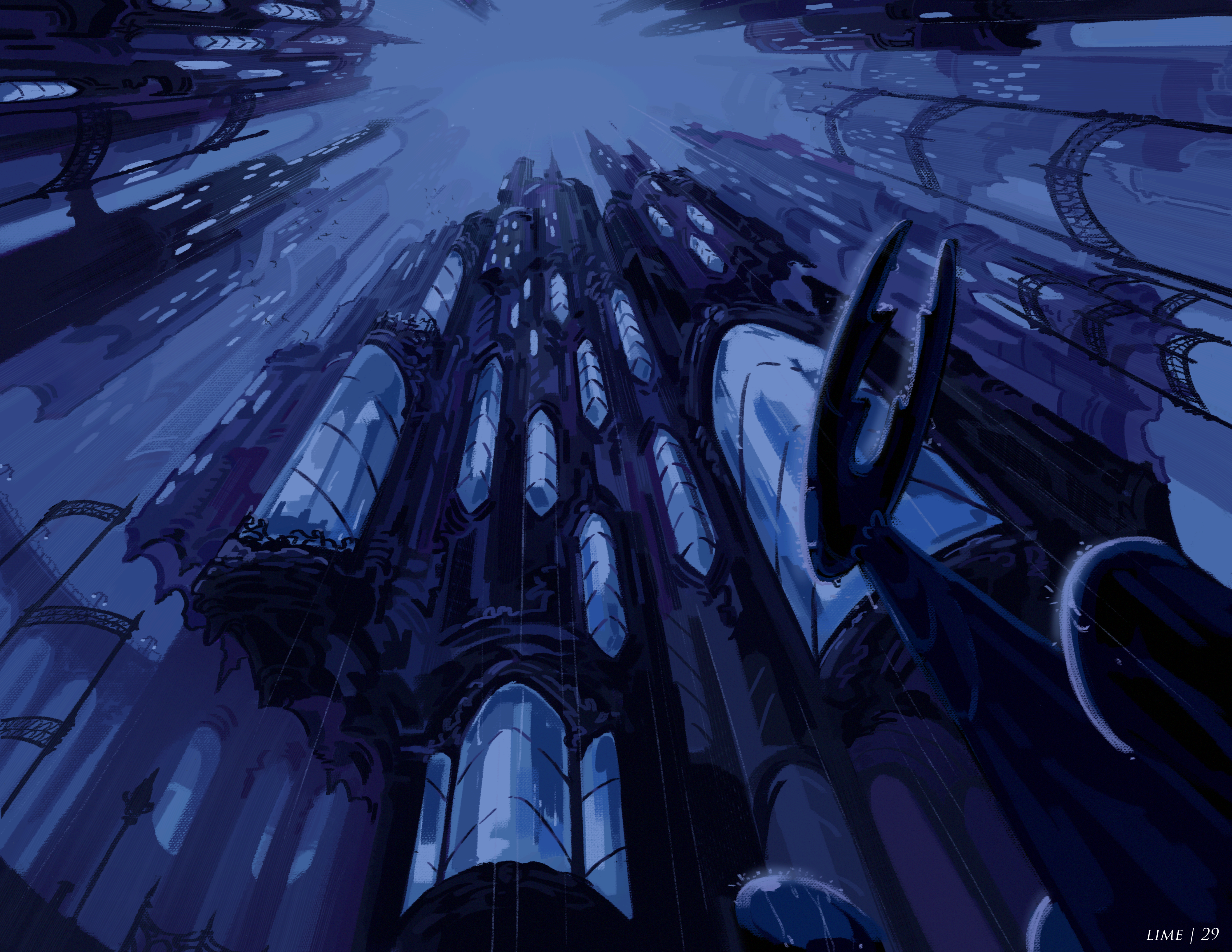

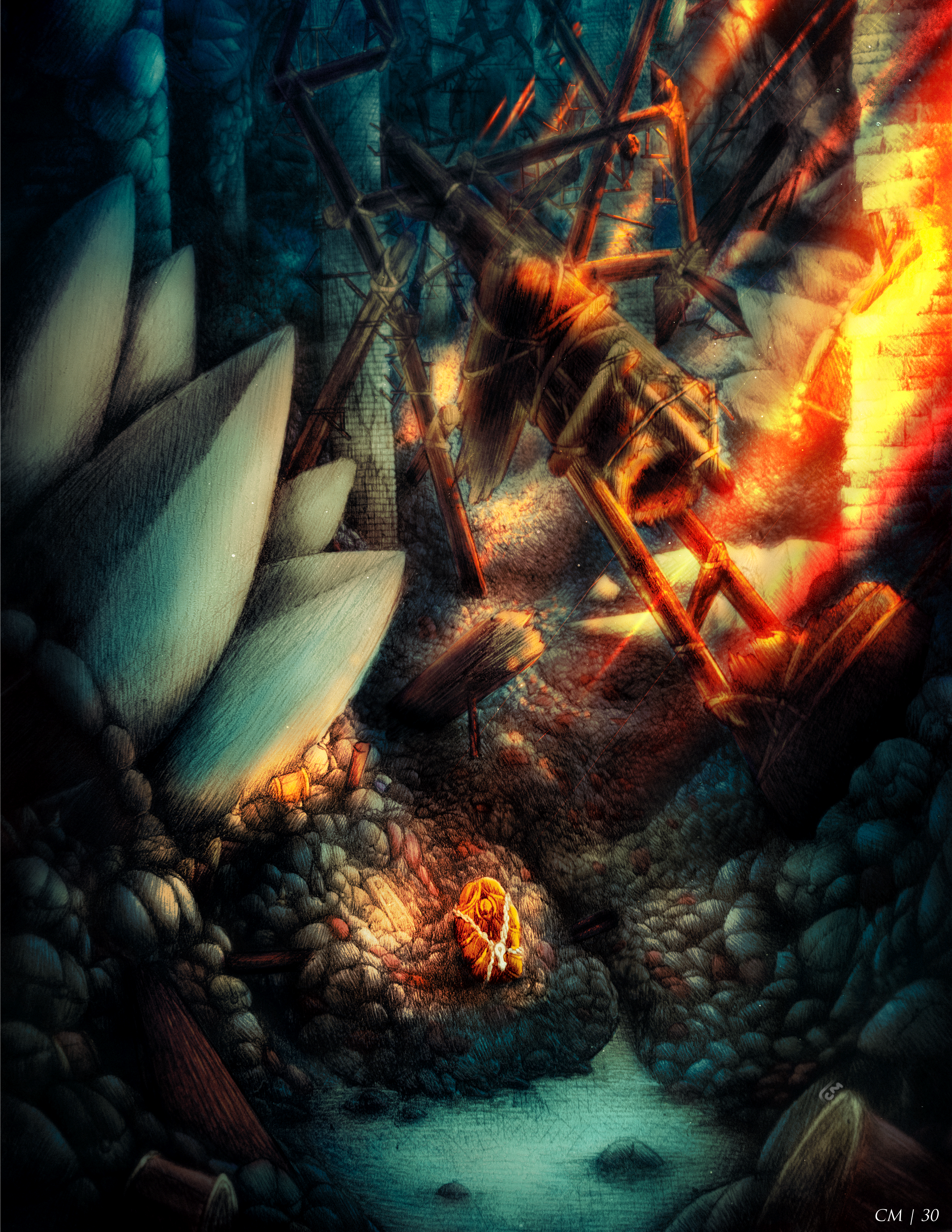

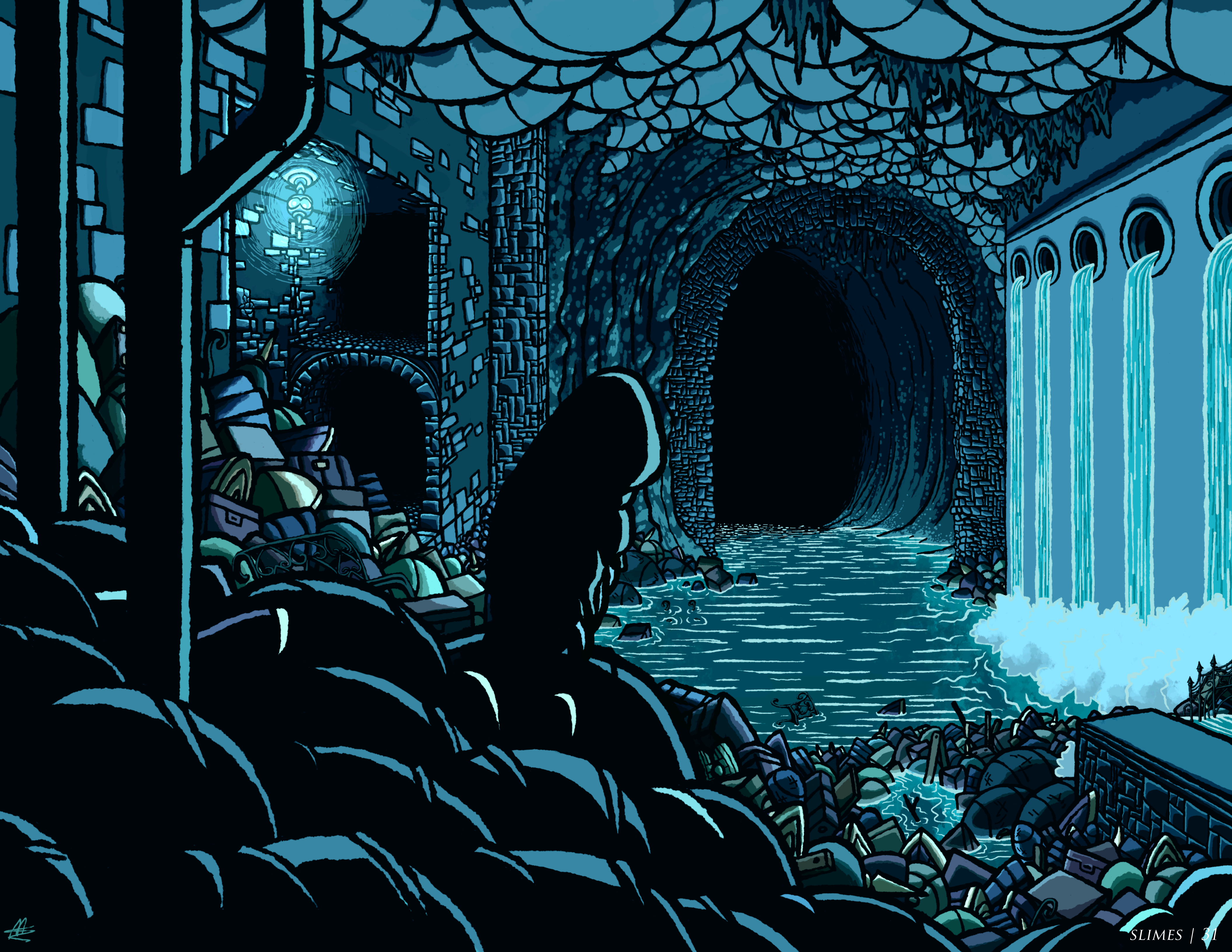

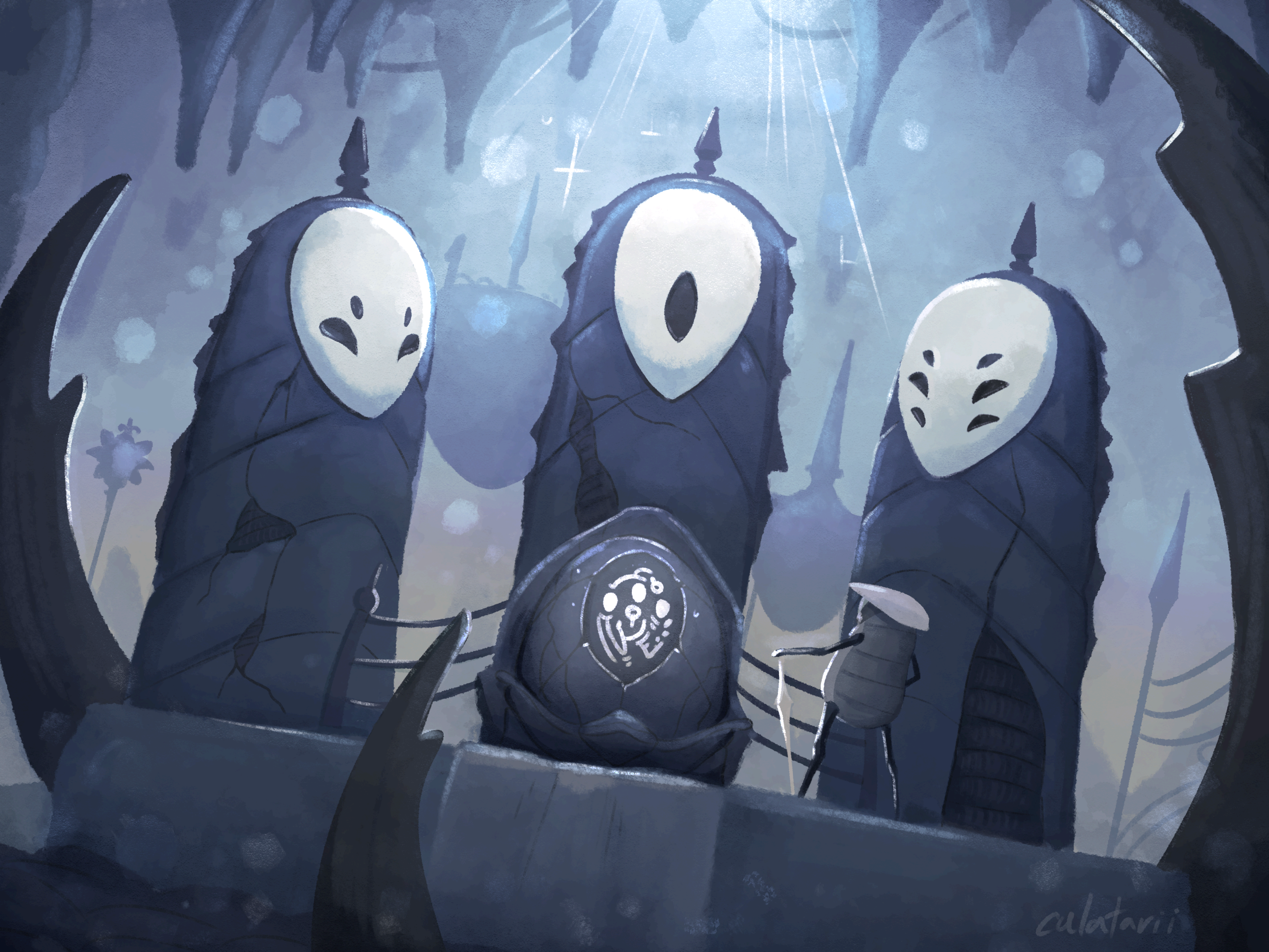
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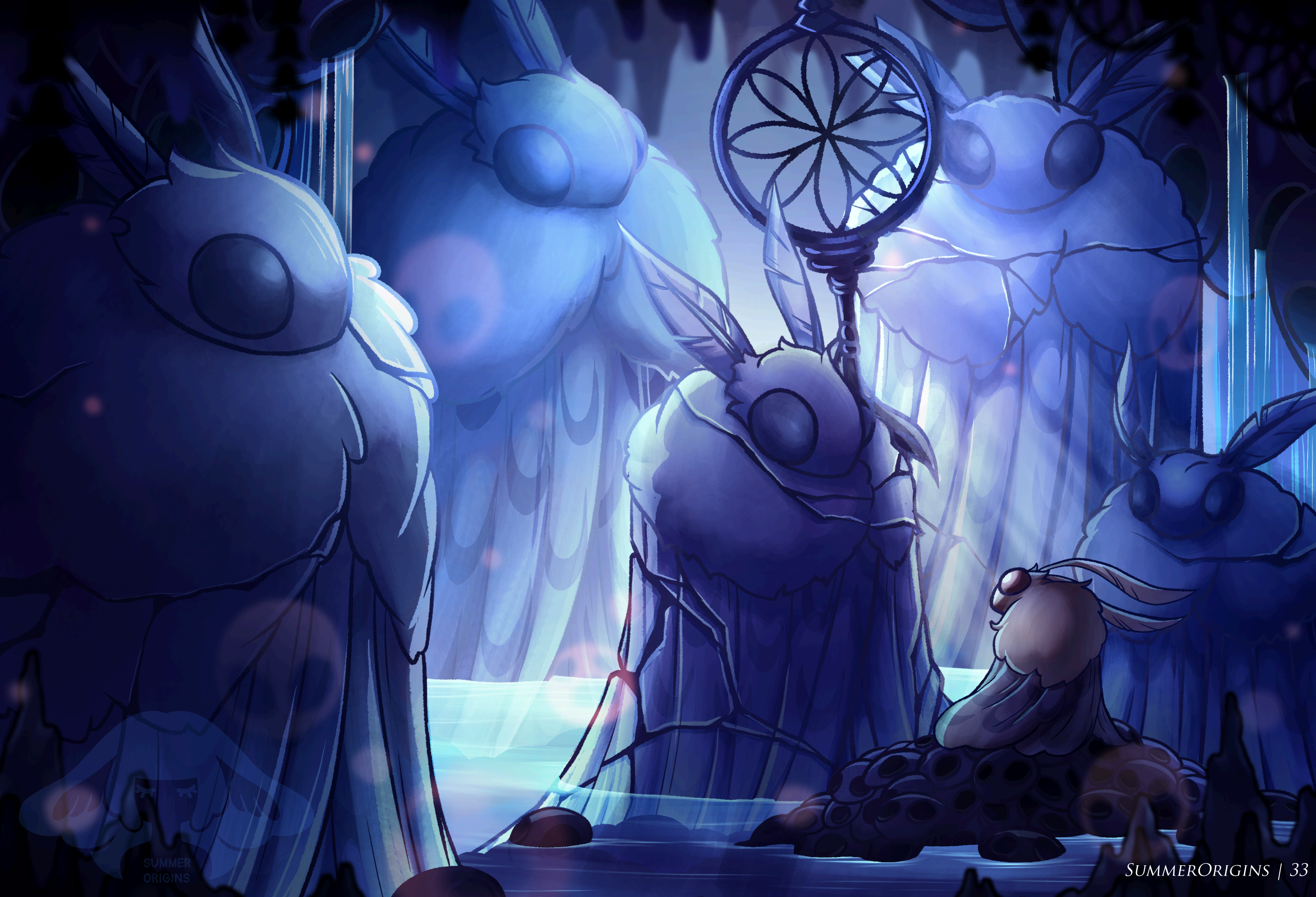


SUMMER
ORIGINS

@girlkisser

BYGONE ERA

What are you reaching for, little shadow?

You regard the winding halls of our home like they are an obstacle to you. Your empty shell stares into its husk, lined with sharp crystals that reflect your dark visage, like it impedes a goal you are so desperate to reach. Your movements methodic, yet full of purpose. All of the peak can feel it within you. It radiates from the pristine caverns and echoes through the memories that still inhabit its walls.

These mines are old. Unused, forgotten, long discarded by a kingdom uncaring. What purpose could you find here? Do you intend to exploit its riches for your own, just as your kin did? If that was your intent, you are failing. You take nothing except the last breaths of our corrupted kin. Is that why you are here?

The gift of death… it is one not taken easily. Not here. Not when the Light pulses within us. A twisted illusion of mercy, one that steals our sense and wraps us in its warm embrace. It chokes us in its false promises.

Long ago, The Pale Light arrived unceremoniously, just as you did. It carved out a home for itself over top our existing one, explored our caverns, discovered our secrets. It told us: I will free you. We listened. Instead of freedom, we were burdened with minds and shackled to a kingdom that cared not for us and yet refused to relinquish us or the stolen home and the precious resources that came with it. All that remains are the broken promises and discarded shells of a once prosperous land. Perhaps, if we were stronger, it would have remained that way.

With every step, you inch ever closer to the heart of our mountain. The climb is treacherous. The path crumbles under your feet, as if the very land wishes to halt your progress. Crystals jut from the unstable ground, tripping you up as you walk, and around every corner is a threat, entombed in crystal and eyes alight with infection. A clash of nail against shell sends sparks flying and alights the caverns ahead, promising darkness and tunnels unexplored since times long past. As you ascend, the air thickens, dust unstirred for centuries and memories long forgotten heavy on your shoulders. I long to whisper to you: turn back, shadow.

You would not hear.

With a flick of the stolen wing, you jump from the dark underpass and land gracefully on ground untouched for centuries. The earth shudders at your presence and the little surviving light shrinks away from you, unspeakable history seeping from your very core. As you straighten your back, the remains of our village come into sight. Long abandoned homes line the path, empty and foreboding. Arches adorned with Her crown encompass the heart of town. A once comforting sight, stolen and stowed away; forgotten, crumbling.

You move forward. Like the rest of Hallownest, our home is hauntingly silent, once full of life now nothing more than an empty tomb. Only the echo of what once was remains. As you progress, you see spells flicker to life around you. In every doorway, a spell seals it shut. Meticulously crafted and enchantingly beautiful. Weaved to keep us out, built to send a message: you do not need this home any more.

Ever forward. This place is small, and though the path leading to it was treacherous, the town itself is easy to traverse. Perfectly accommodating for one of your stature. As you pass under numerous arches, something else comes into your sight as the fog clears. As you creep ever closer, it begins to take form. It is a statue, decrepit and splintered, thousands of cracks and missing pieces a testament to its age. It is a shell of what it must have been in its prime. Feathered wings held aloft and a broken crown pointed to the heavens, the silhouette holds itself proudly even atop its faltering pedestal.

The visage makes something deep within shudder. An ancient, terrible feeling, one we have felt for time unknowable. Memories once discarded, but once the statue looked upon, returned by force. Whispers of dreams we longed to fulfill seep from it.

You look down. At the effigy's feet lays a peculiar piece of metal. A chill emanates from its skeletal form as you pick it up and your fingers brush against the surface. It is familiar to us- unsettling. A reminder of the grim past tied to our very being, of our ruination, and the two responsible for it. What an irony, for an artifact that so resembles Light and Root to lie at the feet of Her image. Their ruin.

For all our lives, all my people ever saw was the warm, comforting light of Her. It embraced us, protected us from the harsh wastes of the world around us. We thought naught. We did not need to; all we ever needed was Her. All She needed was us. We existed to serve. It was our only purpose. We were… happy. Then, one day, a new light arrived. It stole us from the grasp of Her embrace and for the first time, we were not warm. Instead, we were wrapped in the grasp of a cool, bright light. It gave us relief from the never-ending heat. It gave us clarity. It was… freeing. Terrifying.

The Pale Light was inviting, full of promises. It spoke to us, and for the first time in our lives, there was thought. Understanding. The Light told us we were free now. All we needed was it. My people believed it.

We were fools.

Her light was snuffed out. We watched as a kingdom grew and we happily took our place in the Pale Light's legacy, settling into its ever-winding caverns. Our home changed gradually around us. What once were untouched caverns of crystalline purity became a land of industry. At first, it was grand. We could share our home with others, we could expand and grow our land and our knowledge, exploring our new precious minds with fervor. But, cracks appeared…

The other bugs of Hallownest looked at us as strangers; as others in their precious kingdom. We were not Hallownestian, we were outcasts- and our home… it became nothing more than a resource. They cared naught for the natural beauty of the reflective environment, or the vast caves and winding tunnels of our peak, or our rich culture.

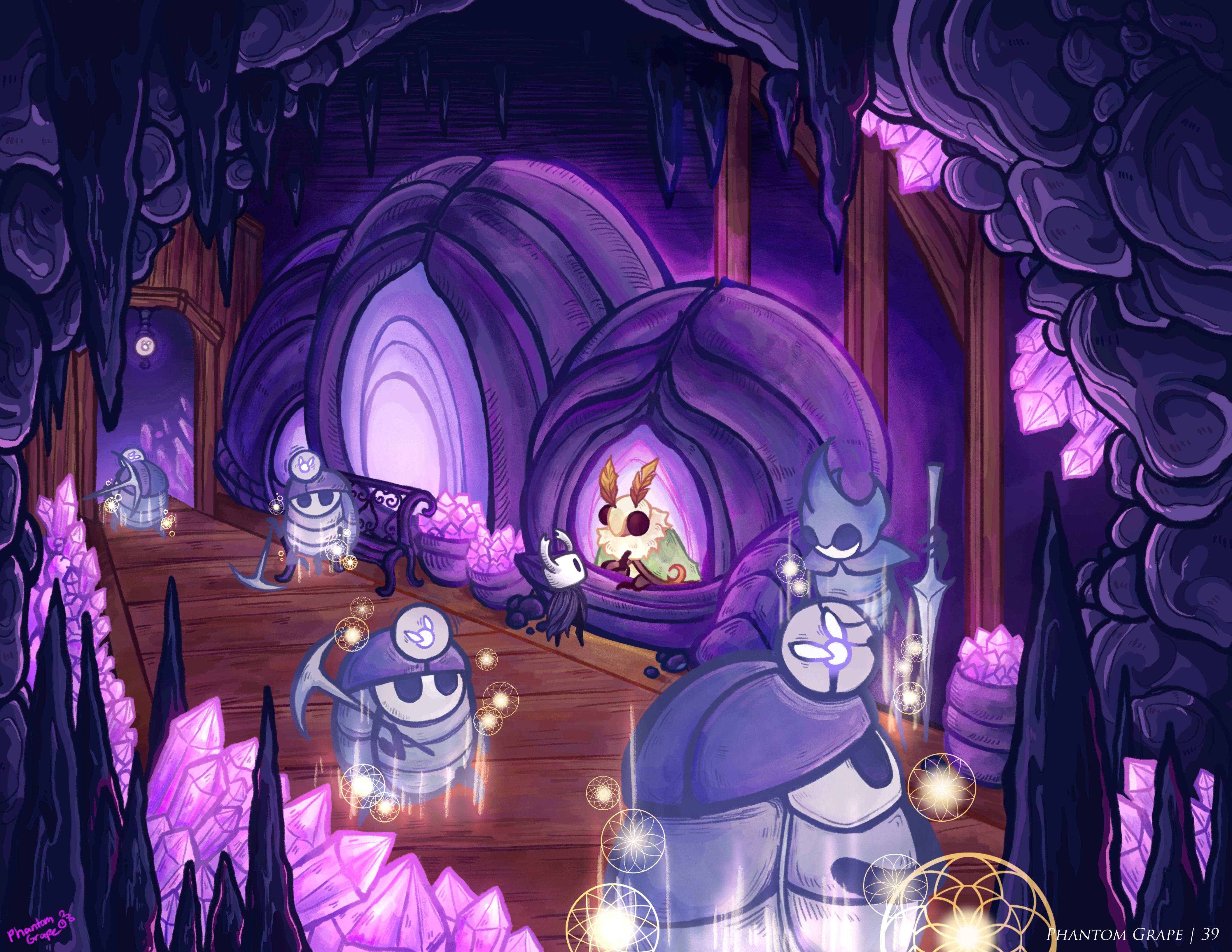
The Pale Light told us it was a blessing. We should be grateful our home took part in Hallownest's everlasting tale. The fruits of our sacrifice would soon blossom, it promised. It continued to promise, even as the crystals began to sing, even as our brethren fell to the dreams, even as the Queen left for her Gardens and even as there was no kingdom left to fight for. For Hallownest, it told us, we must endure. No cost was too great.

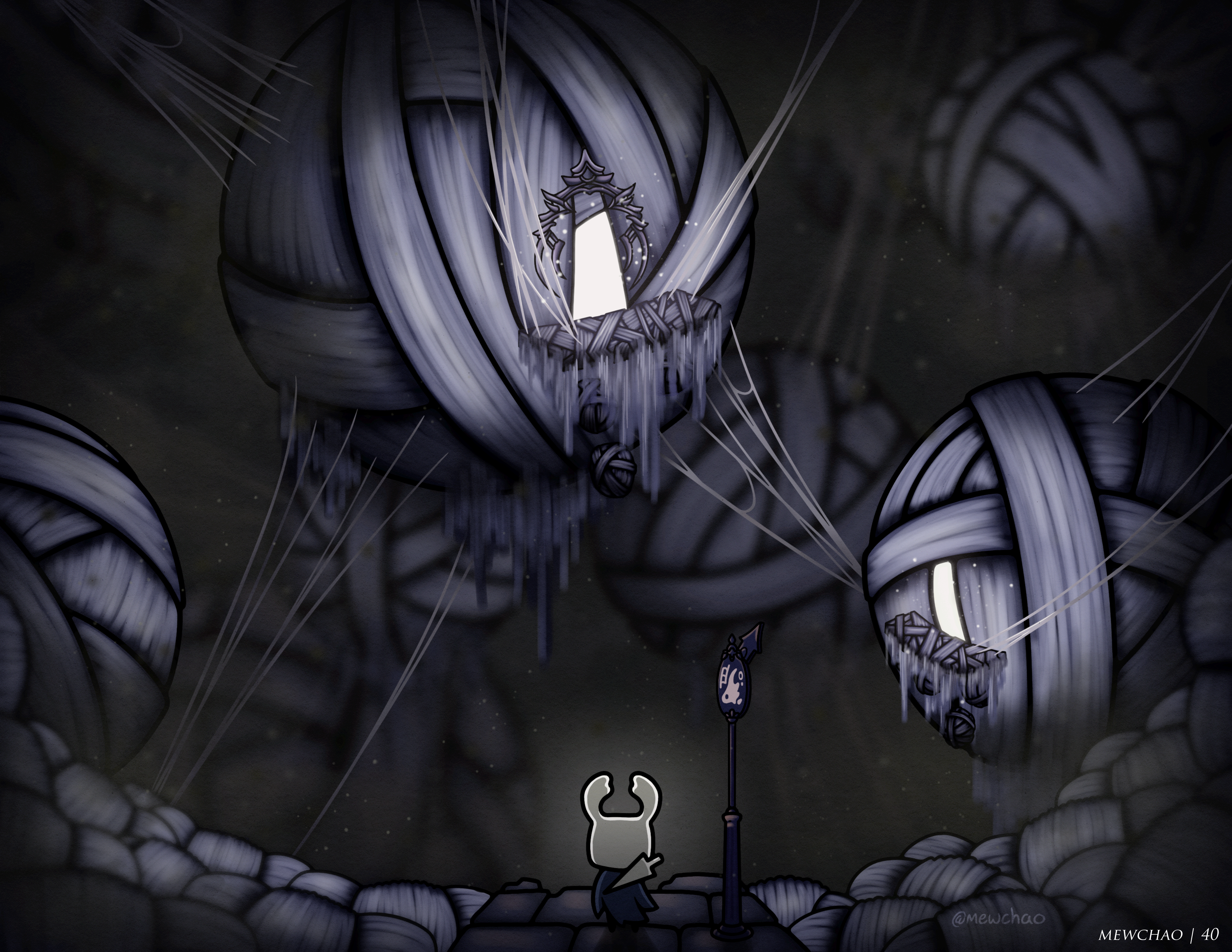
No cost too great…

The Pale Light promised a kingdom eternal, a legacy so great no other would dare rival. But all that is left are the corpses and regrets that stain its soil. Sacrifices made, deals formed, alliances fostered, all in the vain effort of keeping its false paradise alive. In the end, the true price that was paid was the kingdom itself.

And now, you stand here on the peak of that kingdom, at the very heart of Her land, where we were created and where we forgot. You, the embodiment of that cost, a perfect being strong enough to carry the weight of that burden on your shoulders. You have a choice, one that was stolen from us when we fell to Her fantasies. As you leave our peak behind and the memories within it, hold our heart close. Know that though we may never reconcile our losses, you have the power to change the fate of this accursed crown.

Will you even the scale, or break it evermore?


Phantom Grape ©23


@mewchao

OFF TO THE NEXT

The explorer had grown up hearing about the dangers of Deepnest. A secluded gloom wrapped in mazelike webs—it piqued their sense of adventure like no other, and even the threat of death and despair couldn't shake their excitement when they finally, after poking their head into every other nook and cranny reputedly less dangerous, charted their course for Deepnest.

They entered through the tram, which was always a lovely time. The fine ironwork of the station, the antiquity of the system—it was a pity that more bugs didn't use it. If one just looked past the cabin's empty husks and appreciated the comfort of the plush seats, of the gaudy din of the brass speakers which, admittedly, were a tad loud sometimes, one would easily find the Tram to be their preferred method of travel.

At first glance, Deepnest reminded the explorer of the graveyard. The ambiance was similar, though Deepnest was more foreboding than somber, and the path was paved with cocoons rather than cut stone. Walking on such an uneven surface wasn't pleasant, but it was clear that this balancing act was here to stay, so the explorer soldiered on.

Light ahead quickened their pace. Patches of glowing mushrooms sprouted from between cocoons and stalagmites, then… a hot spring, resembling the one in the crossroads with its open-air location and decal of rounded stones. Personally, the explorer preferred the intimacy of the spring in the colosseum, though they found that it could be a tad too intimate during peak hours. The spring in the city's pleasure house was an expensive second option, should the explorer be in town, but the house had lost its luster when the pretty songstress passed.

After a quick dip—because who could resist what was so readily offered?—the explorer was once again off into the darkness, though more toasty than before. The few sights illuminated by their lumafly compatriot were much the same until they came upon a writhing pit of scales and spikes, but a ledge overhead offered an easy way up.

It was here that the explorer had to admit, regrettably, to cutting down their first touched fellow. He was a handsome one, with a horn to be proud of, but he left the explorer no choice when he instigated the altercation. As the explorer walked away, though, a screech and scuttle from behind revealed the most curious thing: The felled fellow had managed to get back up! He'd learned nothing at all, though, and he thankfully did not stir again after that.

Upon closer examination, the explorer discovered that he'd undergone some sort of transformation. Not only had his limbs grown longer, but he'd also sprouted an additional pair of horns and legs. Did Deepnest residents all have this strange power?

Further traveling proved this hypothesis wrong. No, it appeared that only some fellows had this miraculous power, and though the dogged determination with which they pursued the explorer during their second life was to be marveled at, it was quickly becoming rather annoying. But, in these cramped corridors, the explorer had few options, so onwards it was.

Up and up they went, until the darkness gave way to a surprisingly familiar sight. For a moment, the explorer thought they'd somehow circled back, but the second tramway proved too rickety and unfinished. There wasn't even a tram in sight, though many a forever friend rested on the well-wrought platform. The shelf, though, was new, and the explorer rummaged through its knick knacks for a moment. Bits and bobs, odds and ends—it was a wonder how resourceful bugs could be.

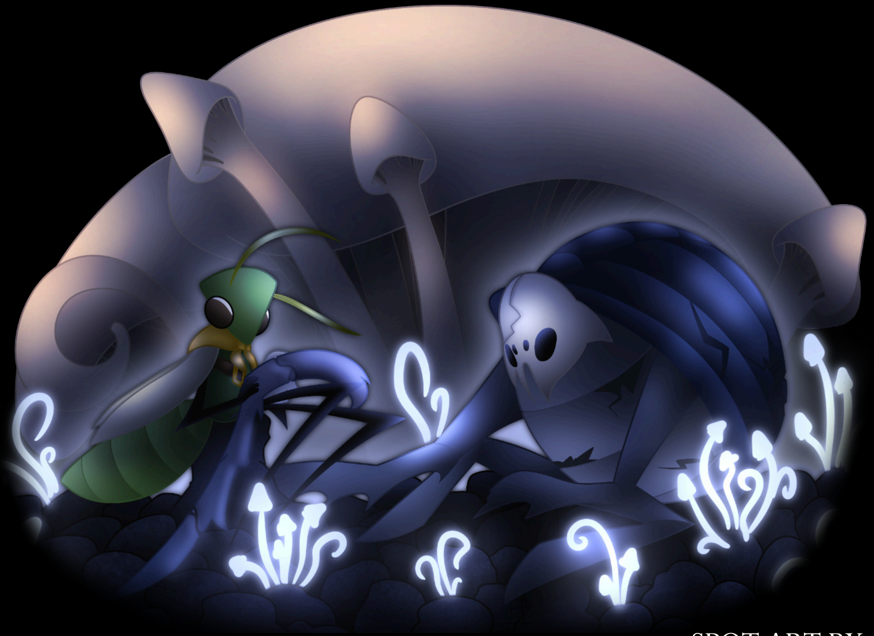
To the east lay the wreckage of what could have been. Grand metalwork saluted in solitude, standing vigil over the carcass amongst the sea of cocoons.

Deeper still, pictographic tablets hung from the ceilings of the tram tunnels, telling stories of ages past. The explorer knew those tales well. They were but a young bug during the age of prosperity, but the memories had lost their luster over the years. Now, they felt as hollow as these tablets, hanging in the darkness of failed aspirations.

The tunnels ahead held large, overfed borers that swarmed aimlessly about their burrows. Being apex predators seemed to have stripped them of their drive: Unchallenged, they stayed stagnant, trapped in the greatness of their heavy carapaces.

To their credit, they traversed the maze of tunnels well, but they also weren't heading anywhere in particular. For the explorer, the twists and turns proved to be more of a hindrance, but they didn't mind; dead ends and near misses were all part of the fun. It was the journey, not the destination, though they hoped that something interesting might lay at the end of all this.

A meadow of butterflies, complete with those blue runners that superstitious medicine bugs kept trying to get the explorer to try, led to a pit that again tempted them with light. After so long in the darkness, could anyone blame them?



SPOT ART BY: Evie

Down they went, nearly landing on the cracked shell directly below the drop. The respectable carapace was dusty with age, but it was the mask that gave the explorer a start. It was Galien! Last the explorer heard, the warrior had been crowned champion at the coliseum, but evidently, that had not been enough. As much as Galien cherished the people he protected, he had always had an insatiable appetite for glory—something that the explorer had cautioned them against, though Galien had been quick to point out the hypocrisy of that statement.

The old fool had finally bitten off more than he could chew. Now, his husk lay lost to legend, surrounded by nothing but the soft glow of mushrooms.

The explorer took a knee before the husk and closed their eyes. The light here bore no warmth, but this simple resting ground was not so bad. Then, after giving the warrior's trusty scythe a quick polishing, they were again on their way.

It was here that the landscape of Deepnest became more vertical. Spines grew on walls and writhed on floors, and the introduction of webs packed cocoons and husks more tightly, ensuring total darkness.

The unpleasantness of this part of the journey pushed the explorer to move faster, lest something went bump in the dark, but that decision quickly caught up to them. In their rush, they almost collided with a pair of giant white doors blocking the tunnel.

A sudden gearlike screech ground through the doors, and the explorer sprang back just as they swung open to reveal six orange eyes that glowed terribly in the darkness. The grating continued, its vibrations rattling the very floor as the eyes shrunk back in the darkness, and it jumped in volume when the beast surged forward in a mess of sound and door-sized claws.

The explorer retreated quickly to the previous platform, relieved to see that the beast did not give pursuit over the pit of spikes separating them. If these fearsome guards were the norm, the explorer could understand why Deepnest had the reputation it did. Most things that went bump in the night didn't do so with weapons larger than their prey.

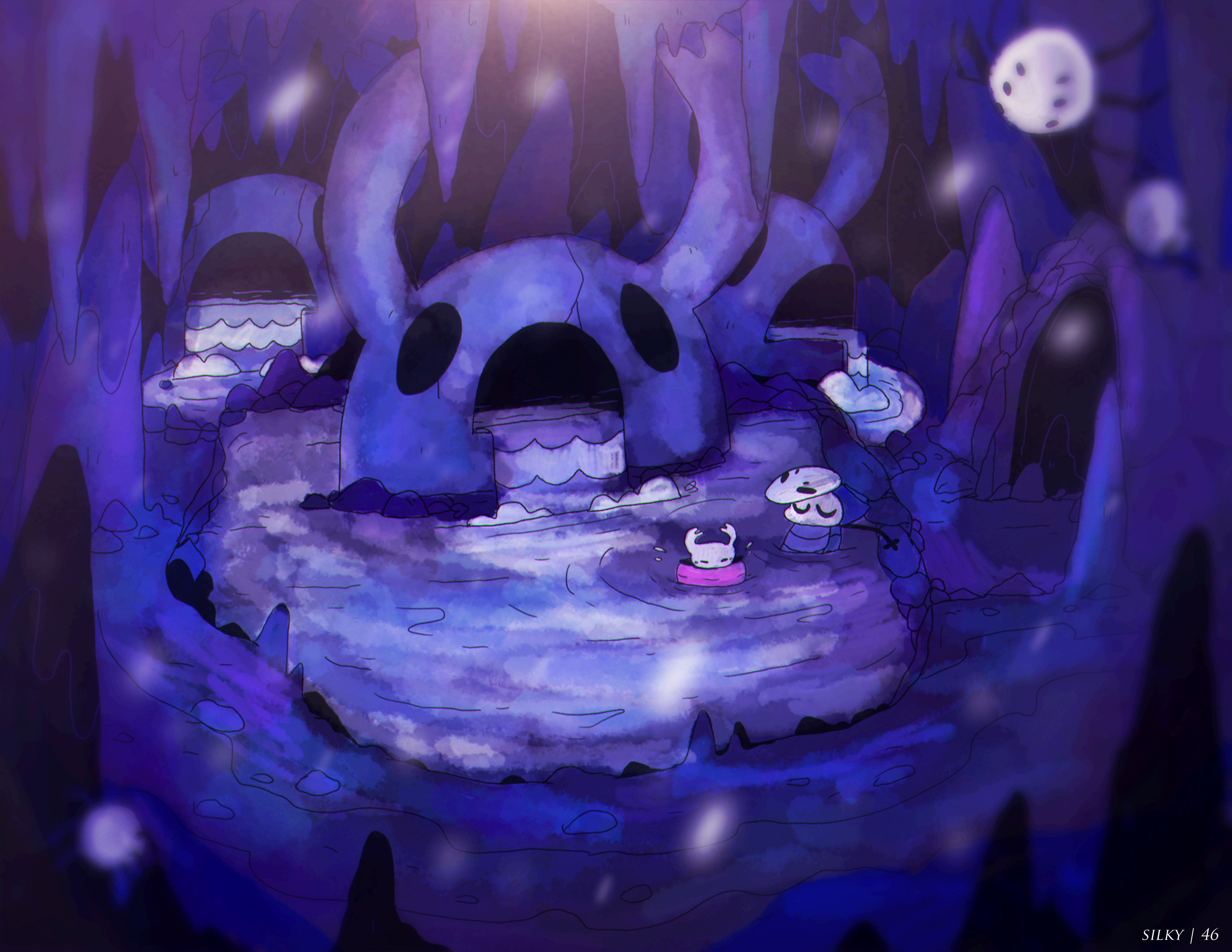
Now, the explorer was an adept traveler, but that didn't necessarily mean that they were the most prolific fighter. In fact, they would argue it meant the opposite: A quick getaway was always the wiser option when one was traveling. It meant less risk and therefore injury, which in turn meant more distance covered on average. The problem, then, was that there seemed to be no way around the colossal beast spanning the width of the tunnel. Except…

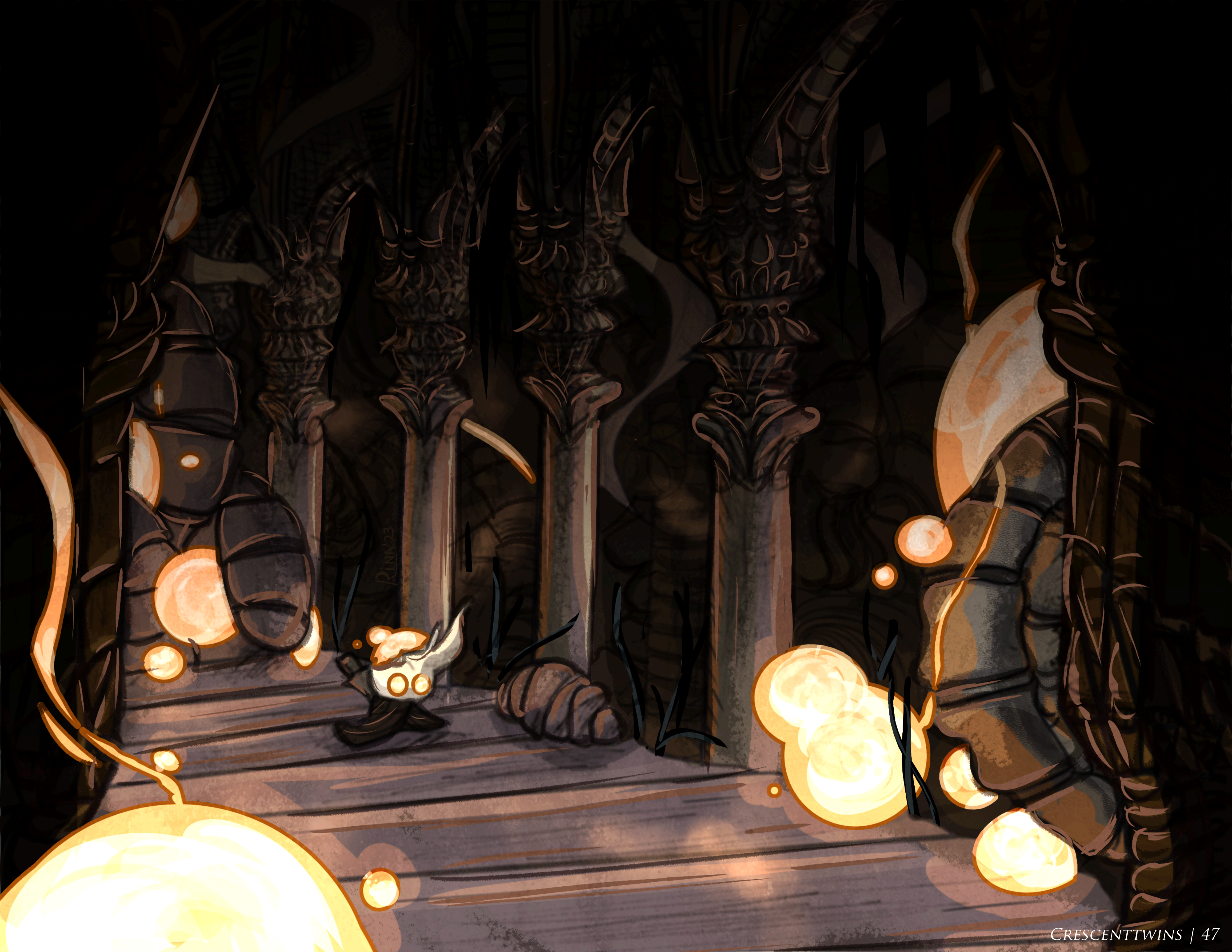
The explorer raised their lantern, squinting at the dark. It was hard to make out where the beast ended and where the darkness began, especially now those glowing eyes were again covered, but it seemed like there was just the slightest gap between the ceiling and the top of the beast's head.

Well, life wasn't without its risks, and thankfully the beast did not seem the brightest. So, leaning forward, the explorer readied themself, then sprung. Across the platform they ran, their long legs boosting them towards the now-quiet beast, then up towards its forehead. Like an agile vaulter, the explorer extended their legs midair, turning so that they slipped just past the beast, the tip of their cape brushing against the top of its blade mask.

The horrible grating started as soon as they touched the beast, and it pitched up as when the explorer's feet touched ground, but that was enough. Up the explorer went, bounding toward freedom with a mighty leap.

They landed with a jolt, taking a moment to clean themself up. Then, with a nod, the explorer continued on with a spring in their step. Off to the next.

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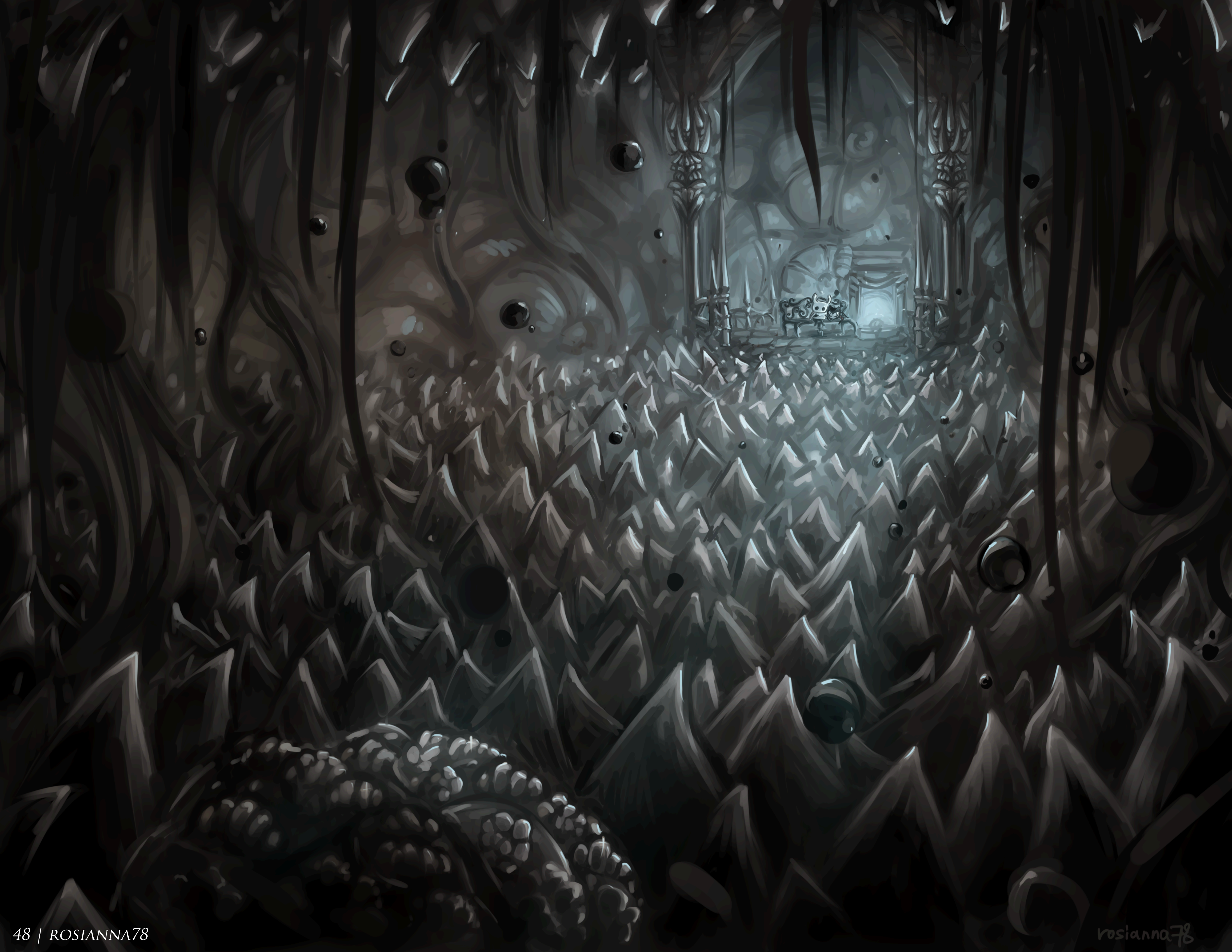
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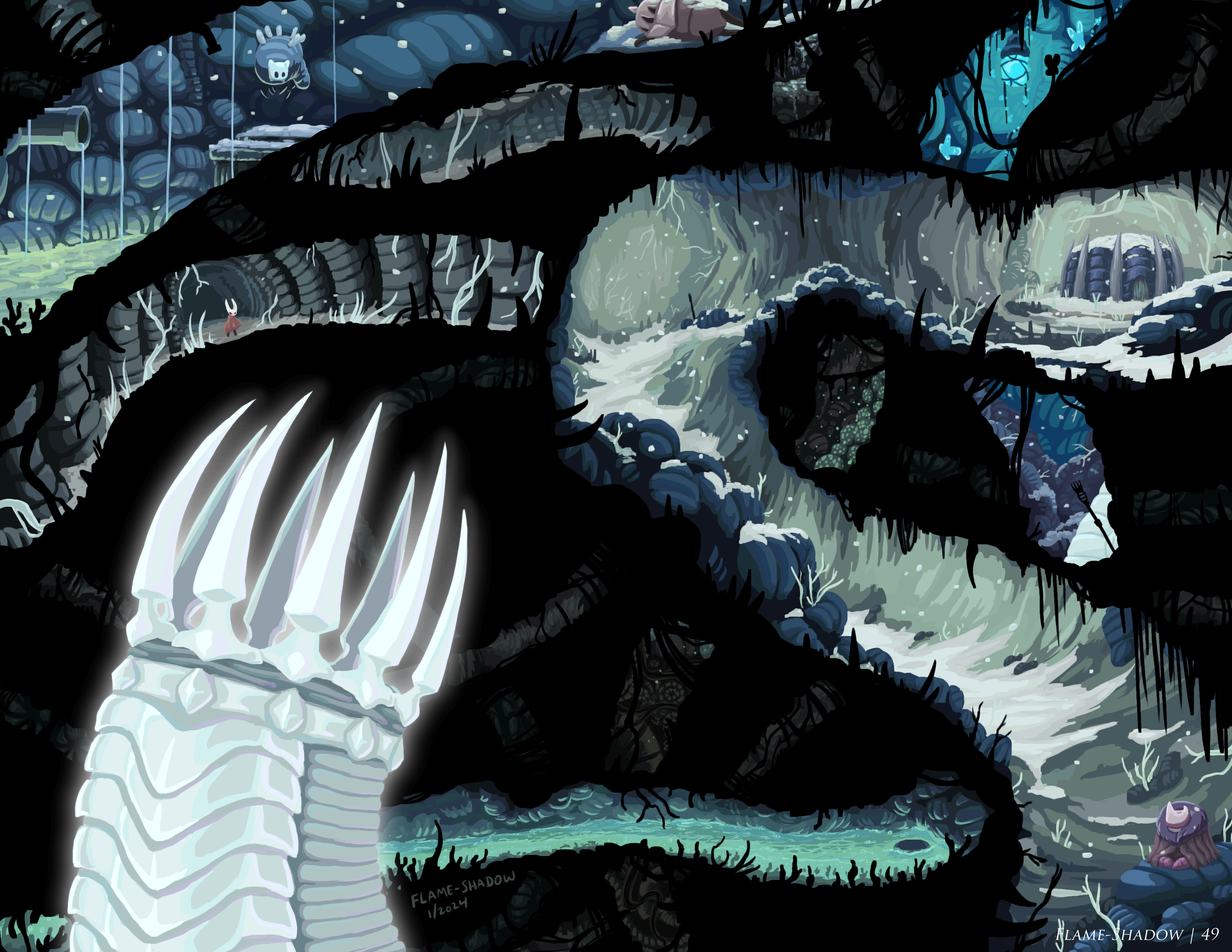

FLAME-SHADOW
1/2024

FALSE WINTER

Oro had never been particularly fond of visitors. He's never been fond of much of anything, and he doesn't appreciate a little grub barging into his home and demanding to learn his nail art. He tells them that if they want to get lessons they have to pay for his time. He names his price, and they storm out upon counting their geo and coming up short.

He's satisfied to be alone for a while until they march right in again a few hours later with the required amount of geo. He's annoyed, but he gave them guidelines and they followed them. He was a man of his word, so he spent a few days teaching them. They were an exceptionally quick learner, and there was power behind their strikes that shouldn't have existed in a bug their size. When his teaching was finished, he expected them to leave immediately. They don't, instead sitting for a while and meditating in what looked like Mato's style. Ah, so they've visited his brother.

When they finally seem content with their stay, they stand and walk over to him. He is confused for a second before they start tugging on his arm. It's less forceful than he knew they could be, but just as insistent. They drag him out of his hut, pulling him through the caverns surrounding it, and Oro thinks that they're going to drag him straight into the acid, but instead they begin climbing. While it had never been Oro's strength, climbing was necessary in ravines such as this. It would have been easier if there weren't so many falling fools. He followed them up, and they stopped once they were about halfway to the top. They sat on a cliff, their legs dangling. Oro sat next to them.

He hadn't said anything this entire trip, but now they were just staring upwards and not doing anything. He cleared his throat to get their attention. They did not turn.

"Why did you bring me here?" Oro thought it was a reasonable question. They shrugged and pointed up. A completely unreasonable response. Great. Oro looked up to where they pointed, only seeing rock and ash. "You must have some reason."

His student tapped their chin thoughtfully. They then waggled their fingers while moving their hands down, then mimed shivering. Oro thinks he should be proud that he got even an inkling of what they were saying.

"...Snow?" They nodded fervently. "You think it looks like snow, huh? I've never been outside of these caverns, but I have heard stories about snow. I always thought it sounded nice."

He looked down at them. They were staring intently, raptly paying attention. It made him a little self-conscious, and the lack of apparent eyes was not really helping.

"This is not snow, however. This is ash, blown from the east. There was a rumor, once, that this ash was molt. Molt from a giant creature, eroding for eternity. Don't think there's any truth to it, though." Oro looked back up the ravine. He couldn't see the top. Ash floated down, and it might have been beautiful to him once. The moment was tarnished when the corpse of a fool plummeted past.

The small bug next to him watched as the fool's shell cracked on an outcropping, bounced minutely in the air, then continued its descent. They suddenly swung their legs back over the edge of the cliff and stood. Oro thought that this might mean they were done, ready to continue their journey and leave him alone. They, instead of beginning the climb down, walked away from the cliff towards a pile of ash. Oro sighed and followed.

"What now?" He asked, standing next to them. They were looking intently at the ash.

He realized a second too late what said intentions were when they bent their legs and jumped. Oro scrambled to catch them before they made a mess, but they landed successfully in the ash pile, scattering it everywhere. Including him. He was about to start yelling at them, but they appeared from the newly dispersed pile absolutely covered in the stuff. It was sticking to their shell, their cloak, and he thought that there might've been some in the eyeholes of their mask.

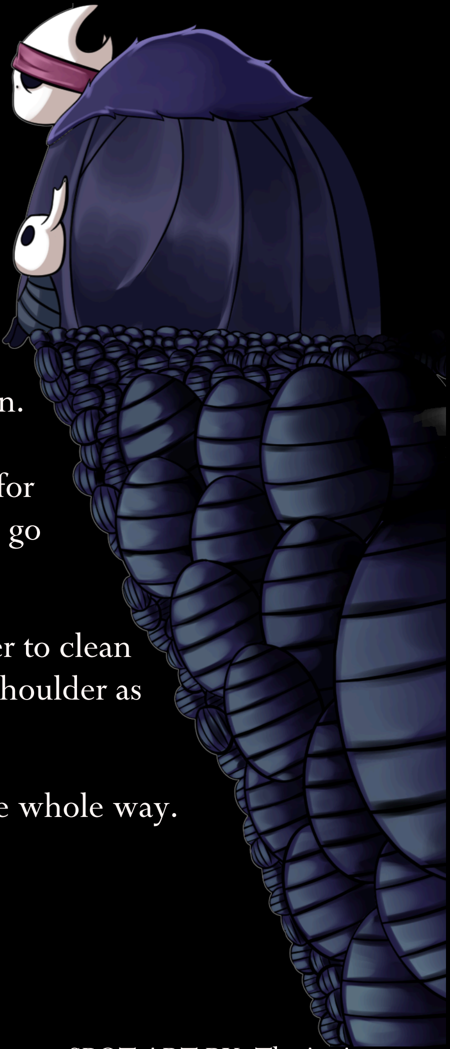
He couldn't help himself, he started laughing. Some ash drifted off of them when they put their hands on their hips in offense, making him laugh harder.

“You should have realized, my pupil, that that was not the best idea if you wanted to stay clean.” Their arms fell to their sides and they nodded solemnly.

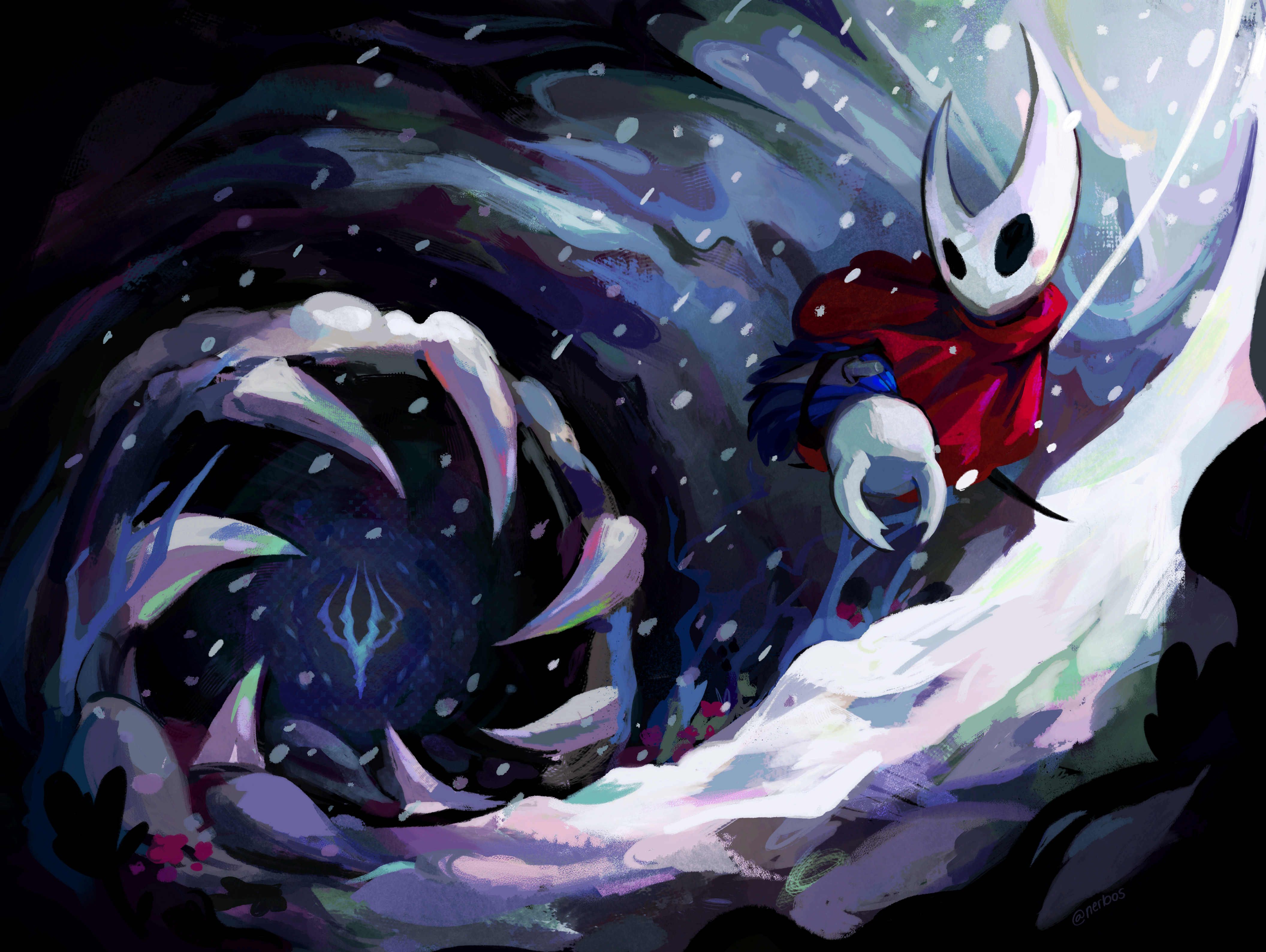
Oro attempted to dust himself off, but the ash in these caverns had always been an extreme pain to clean. It was surprisingly sticky. Resigning himself to finding ash in his clothes for the foreseeable future, he decided to go wash off.

“Come back with me. I have water to clean yourself.” He said, looking over his shoulder as he turned to begin climbing down.

His pupil followed, trailing ash the whole way.



SPOT ART BY: TheArtArmature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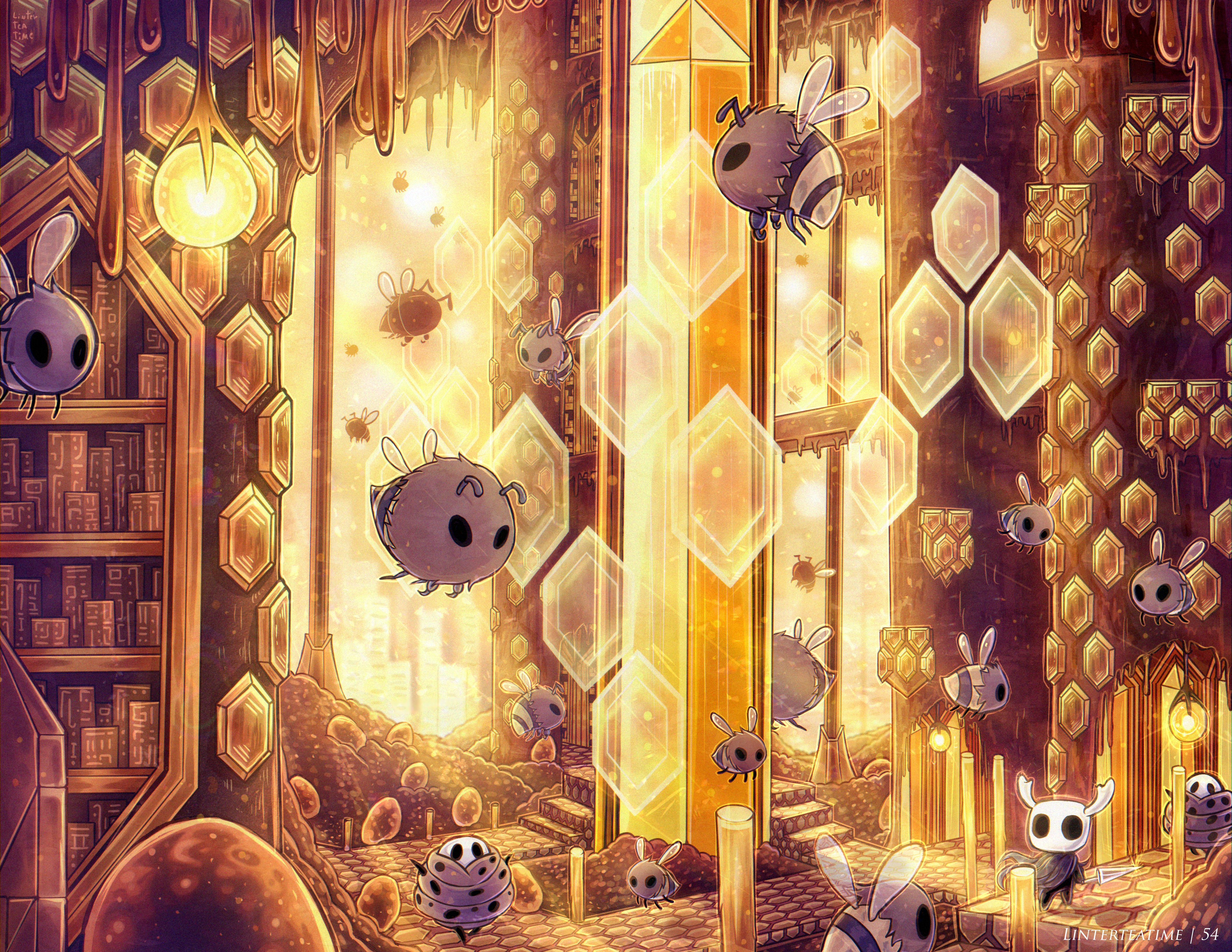
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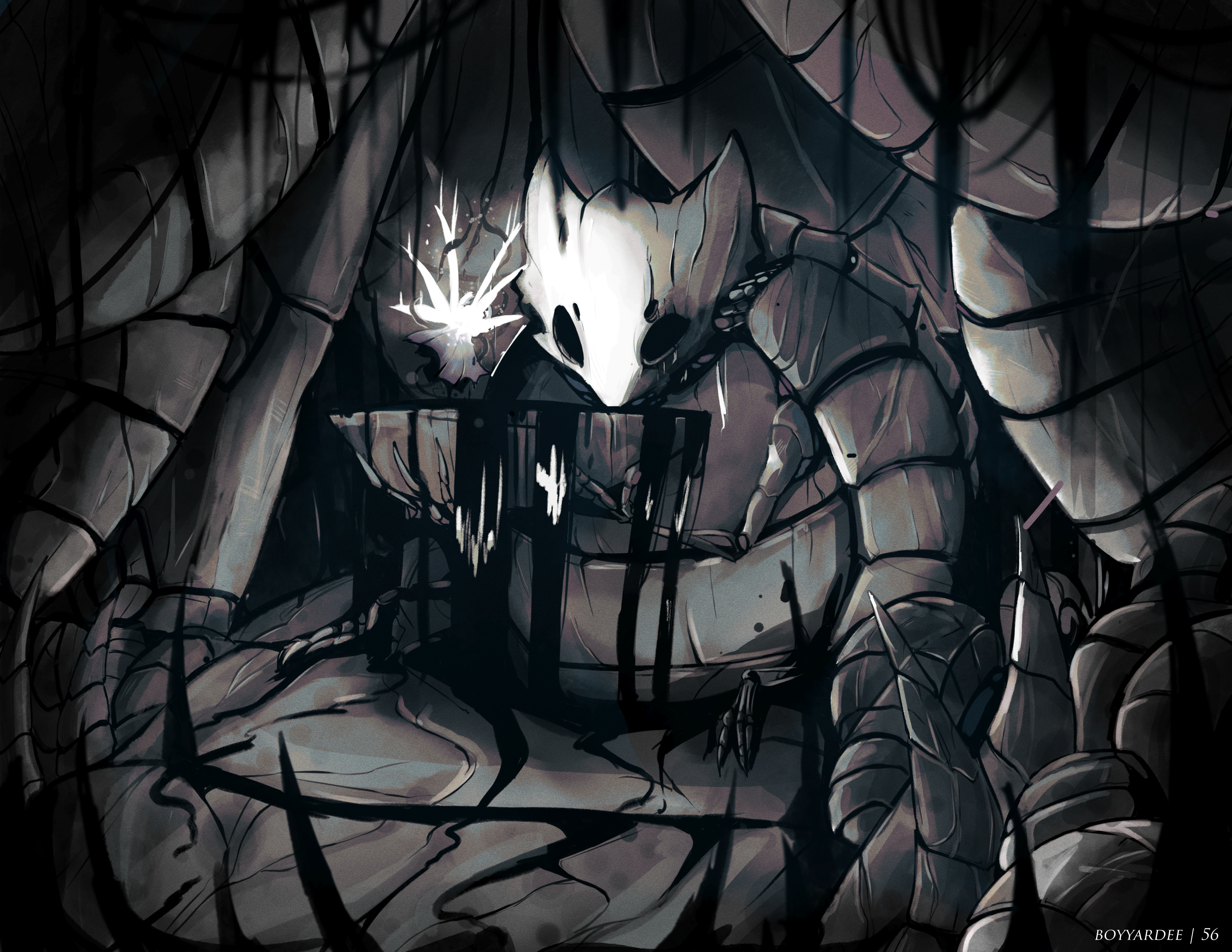


* * *

The air in the Abyss was stagnant and heavy, so soaked with Void that it hung in the air like a thick blanket. It made the tips of their horns ache.

Time itself seemed to slow to a crawl, struggling to move through the choked air.

The Knight stood in a transitional area, a hallway, in theory, like many others they'd passed. But where most areas bore some mark of Hallownestian construction- scaffolding, lights, or signs- the Abyss seemed as though it simply… was. As though it had always been. As though the rocks had simply moved into their positions of their own free will.

It was home… if one ignored the scattered angry shades screaming endlessly, a dull ache in their horns as their Void stirred to match them. It was their cradle, and their grave.

The Void here was alive, if not awake. Reactive. Twice now, they'd passed deceptively still pools that erupted into lashing claws whenever they grew close, trying to snuff out the blinding light seared onto them by birthright. The Knight watched them slam fruitlessly into floors and walls with the strength to shatter chitin, and then they'd carefully jumped up out of reach.

It was stirring. Restless.

The hallway opened up into a vast cavern, one so grand that they couldn't see the other end from where they stood.

Dominating the landscape was a great tower. Though it was coated in a pale, metallic veneer, the ceaseless hand of erosion had cracked off its edges, revealing the same dust-grey shell-stone as the rest of the landscape beneath.

Twisting around its circumference was what was once a set of stairs, long platforms carved of the same washed-out, pale metal, and columns of dark stone similar to the ones that made up their first fateful climb. Though much of the staircase had fallen from its mooring with time, the columns were placed closely enough to fill the gaps.

The building–a lighthouse–overlooked a dark, still sea. The Knight was practically vibrating, close as they were. If they had a mouth, they'd surely taste the regret lingering in the air.

Their first attempt at approach proved fruitless. The moment their faint glow hit the edge of the sea, it erupted, spraying teeth and claws and tendrils out into the open air, forcing them to retreat as an arm twice the width of their body threatened to crush them like a Husk Guard's greatclub.

The tower, then. If brute force would not propel them, perhaps they could find a different solution there? Yet a problem immediately presented itself in a swarm of shades like flies orbiting the tower's radius. If they focused on the ache in their horns, they could almost hear them weeping.

It would have to be ignored.

The Knight retrieved their nail from their back, crouched, then dashed forward and upward onto the first stair. A gap immediately presented itself, but no matter, a shade sat within it.

An enemy.

An obstacle.

They leapt forward, bringing their nail beneath them in preparation to swing off and upward, and then–

One of the Others was falling from above, complete silence from where their space used to be. But It did not notice, or else could not care, and instead counted seconds, prepared to jump and strike with the shell-horn they'd found snapped off from one, three platforms down.

They prepared to jump, striking out— only to discover they'd mistimed it, the empty space dragging them down below—

They felt ill—suddenly, violently ill—fumbling the landing and having to activate their Wings to prevent them from falling. Pain radiated through the air, the distant echo of a silent scream, ringing about in their horns like an injury shortly after a shed.

Scrambling atop the platform, they would have wished for a moment to collect themself and question the flash of memory that rippled through them when their nail hit true.

Aftershocks.

Unfortunately, they would gain no such time. The shades were advancing upon them, and hostile intent soaked the air. They couldn't afford to think—they could only afford to *move.*

Up another platform, flapping just out of the way of a lashing tendril to dash forward to the next stair—jumping forward and clinging to the edge of a column, pulling themself up the side, but then, a flare of anger behind them—

It stood on a platform beside an Other. Consistently, the two had been bumping into each other, and it had had enough. The Light called for all of them- surely it wouldn't miss one of them? It snapped off a horn from a nearby empty space, and mercilessly struck forward—

Their own scream pierced the air—more alive, more present—just enough to startle the shade that had just knocked them off the column. An accidental distraction, giving them enough time to dash forward and scramble back up. Pull themself over the edge, dash, fly, jump up to avoid one attack only to dash directly into another—

The Light beckoned them forward, upward, ascend and climb. It couldn't really think of much else, constantly looking up at the glorious Light above. So great was its distraction that it failed to notice a falling Other, and the empty space crashed into them mid-dash, sending them falling to the floor where the sharp, sharp horns of fallen Others lay waiting.

Their shell ached, cracked from inside and out, the Void in their shell rebelling at their sibling's touch. Straining. Fragile. They flapped back to the previous platform, took a moment to Focus with the Soul they'd gained earlier, and dashed ahead.

SPOT ART BY: SummerOrigins

Onward came the frantic climb, their sibling's memories growing closer and closer to the top as they traded blows.

Pain shot through it as it fell to the teeth of the Abyss—

Crack!

No mind to think.

It jumped after the Other in hopes of saving them, only for the ground to be further than they think—

Crash!

No will to break.

It stepped forward, and a lance of Pale Light ran it through before it could think—

Smack!

No voice to cry suffering.

It misses the jump, claws scrambling at the side of the platform before it falls, falls, falls—

Slam!

You will seal the blinding Light that plagues their dreams.

The Void calls them forth louder than the Light, so they turn around and embrace it with open arms—

Smash!

You are the Vessel.

The top of the lighthouse beckoned them, just a few platforms away. They jumped, flapped, reached out for the edge—!

You are the Hollow Knight.

For just a moment, a flash of their own memory plagued them. *The Other, looking back, and then leaving, leaving,* ***leaving*****—!**

And then they pulled themself over the platform, and they were alone.

The shades refused the inside of the lighthouse. The air tasted like fear. The air tasted like mourning.

From here, their job was simple. Almost clinical in their efficiency.

Acquire Soul. Heal. Use the Artifact on the corpse and learn its perspective.

Finished with their quick exploration, they lifted their nail from their back and hit the lever with a firm smack.

And for a moment, the world went white.

When their vision clears, they are alone. Their horns are ringing, the echoes of pain and fear fading off into silence. The Knight leaves the chamber to see what they've accomplished.

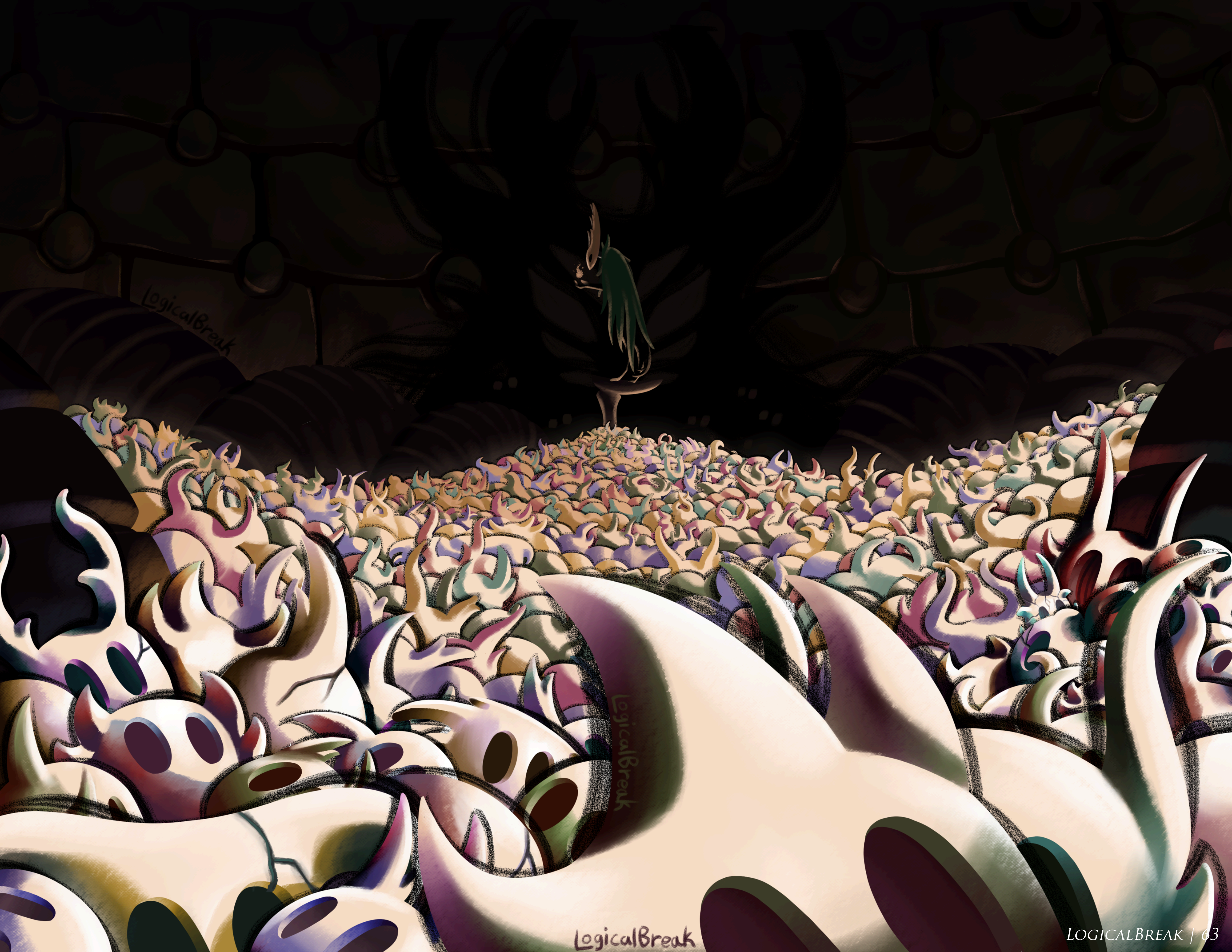
[Art]

A blinding Light lays thick on the sea like a blanket, nearly a physical presence in its oppressive weight. A beam like a wound carves through the air, sharply contrasted against the gloom of Void.

They have succeeded.

~~The Light makes their body itch.~~

It's time to go.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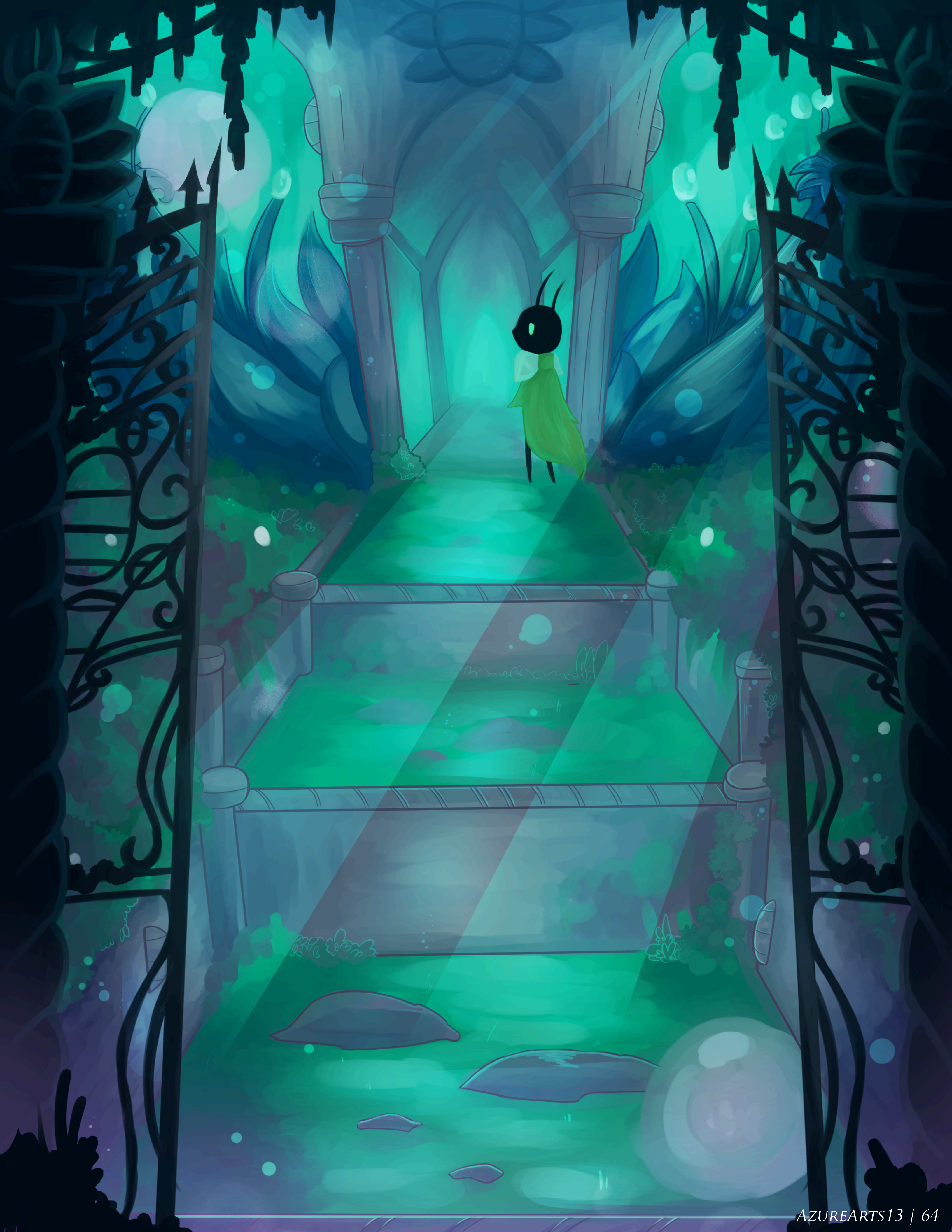

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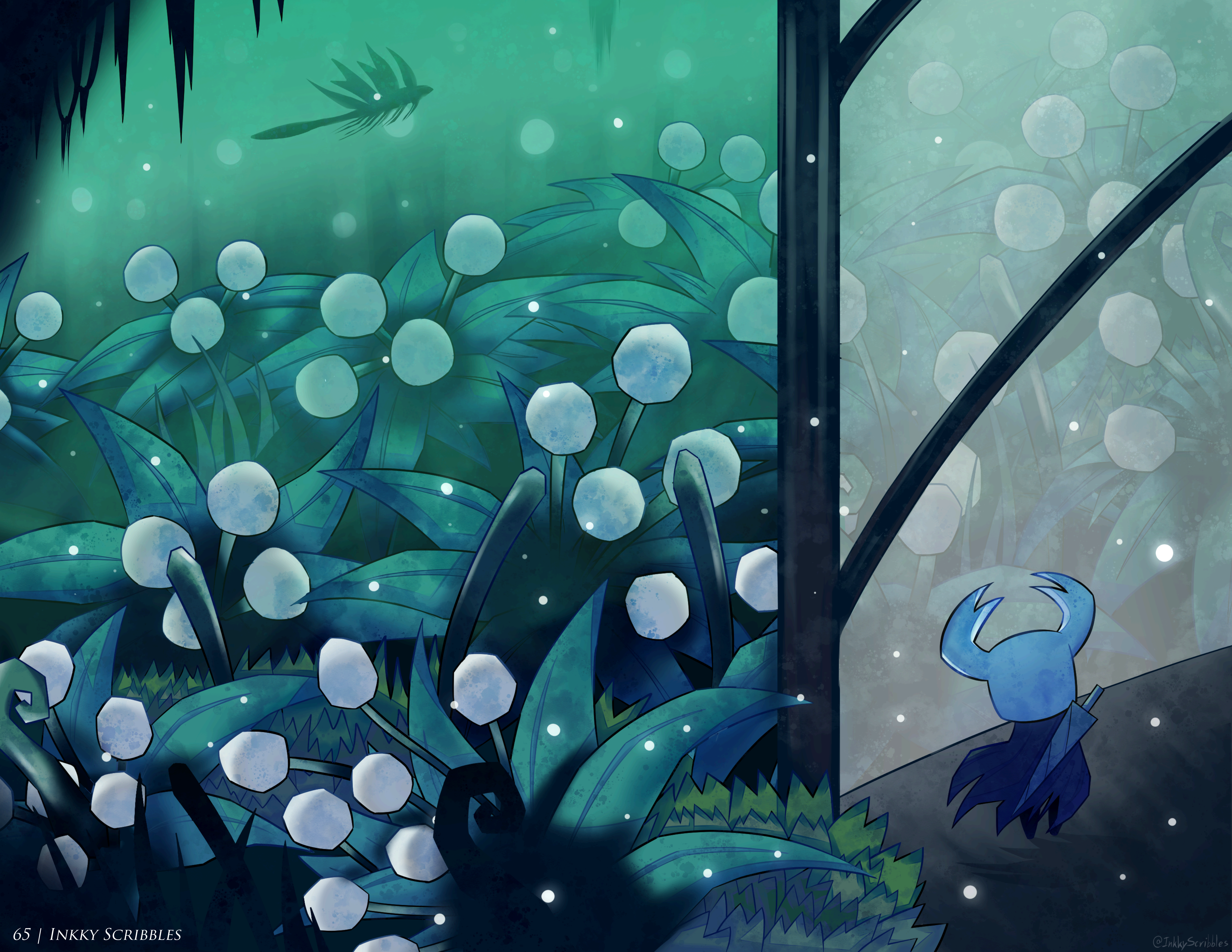
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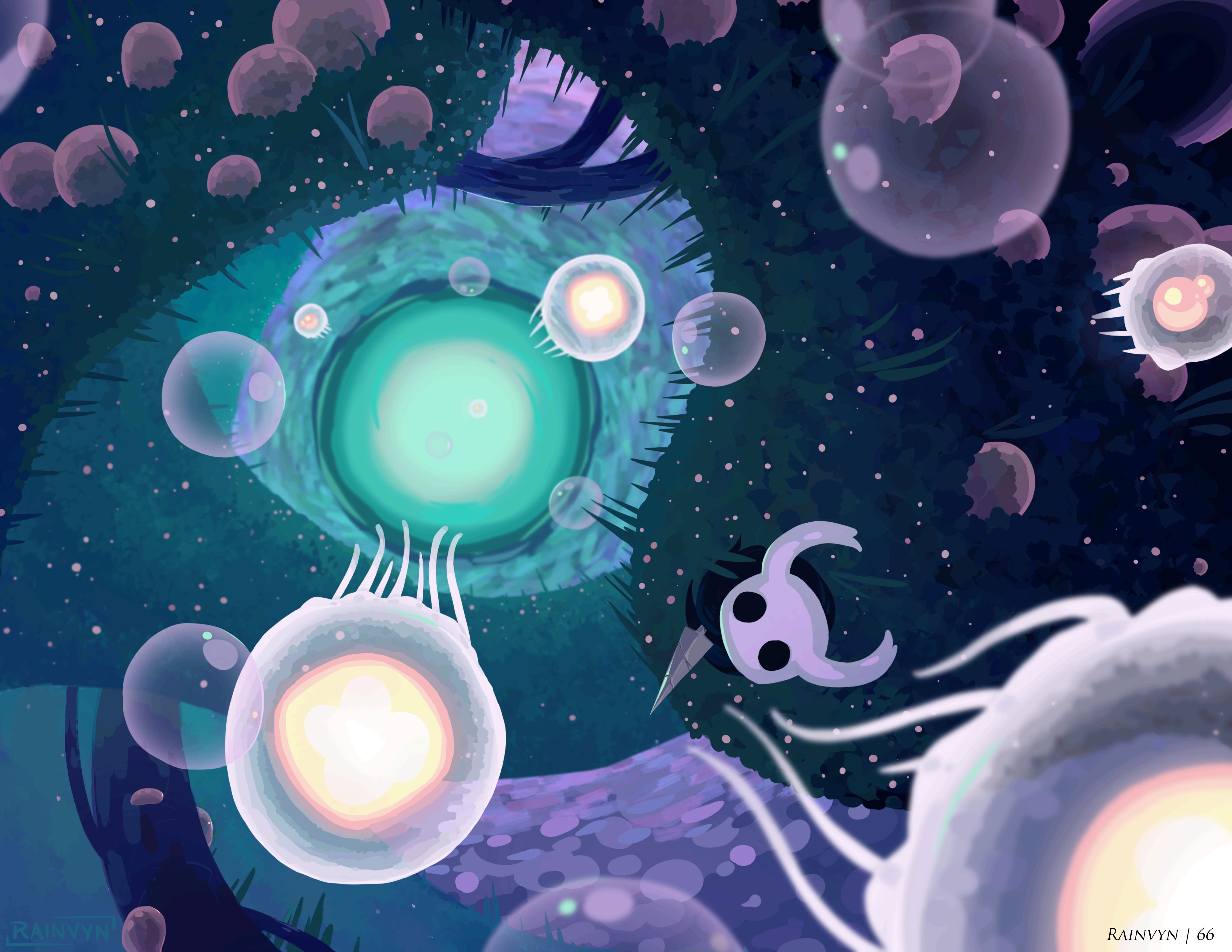
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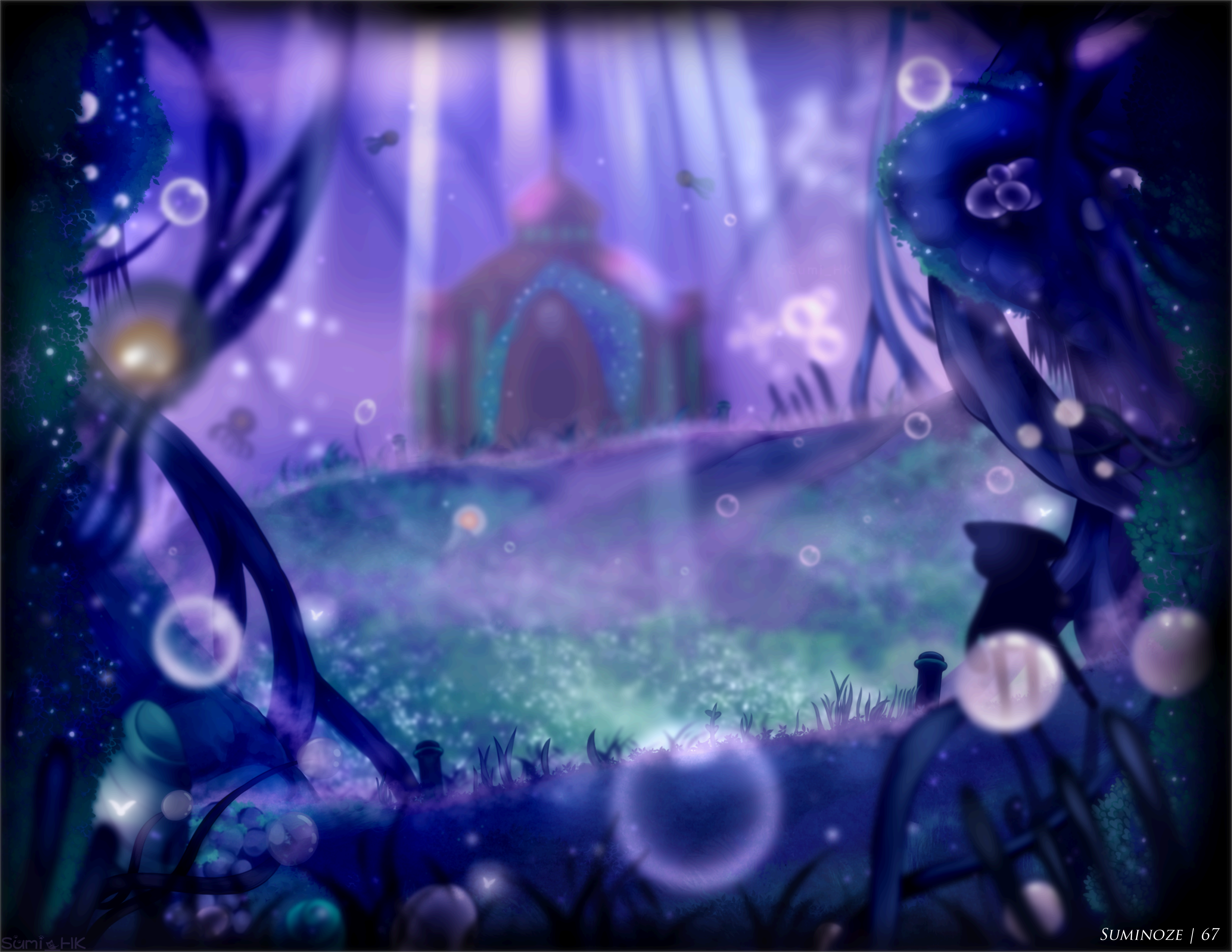
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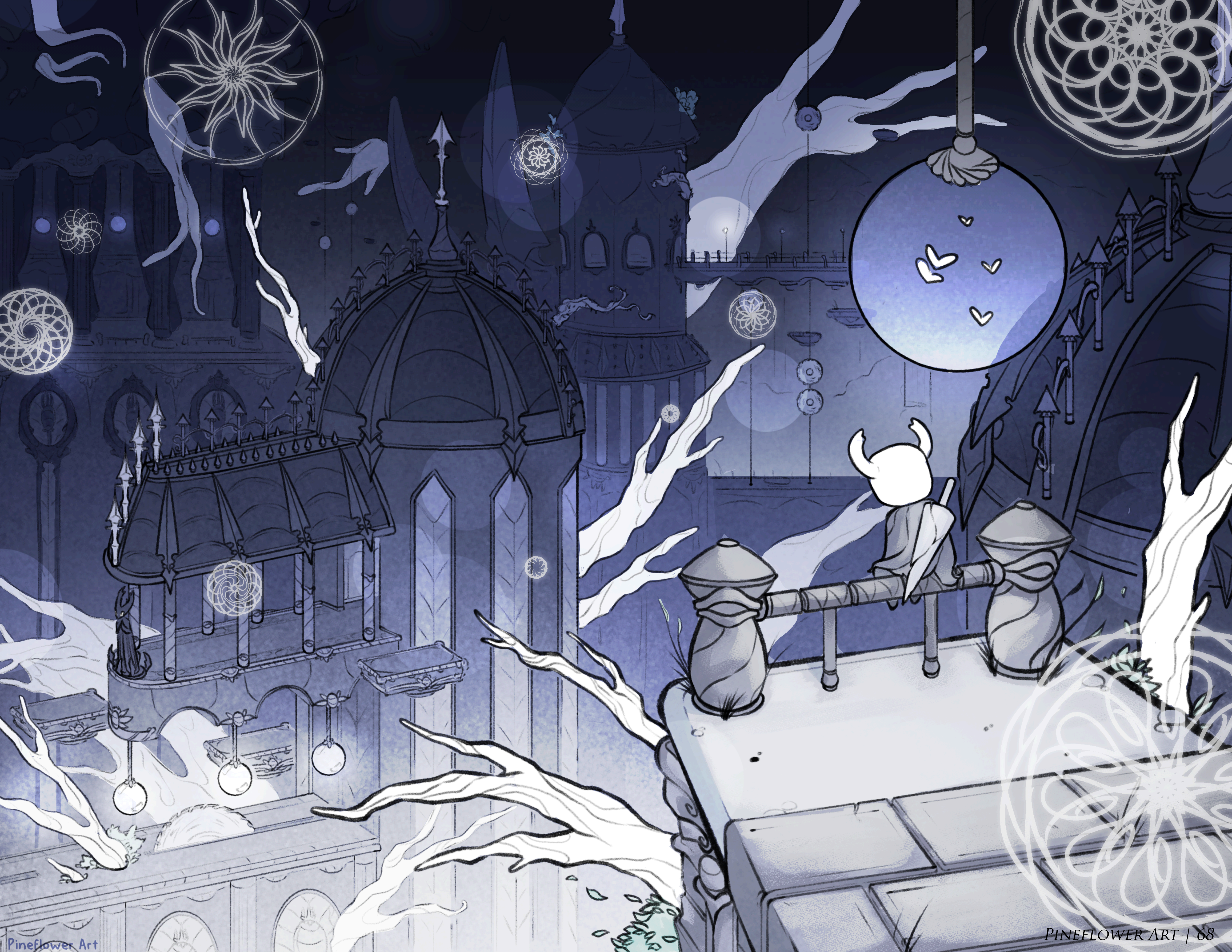

Pineflower Art

LEMM --Traveller came in and brought these chunks of written words on ore-rock. They're practically water-washed now. Hard as shell to get a good reading. Still. Shall try.

Appears to be a professional report of an architect who attended the White Palace, pre-dating the collapse of Hallownest. Entry #1, which seems the earliest record, seems to talk about re-designing the High Lady's quarters for a newly expected child. This part is the cleanest in draft:

1.

10:15 pm. Upon examination of crystallites present in bedrock around the High Lady's quarters, concluded distinct triangular striated prints like those in nearby archaic undergrowth. [1] opaque & rendered pure white by exposure to His light. Great barren flowerpots loom against the pale-painted walls.

1. Unknown translation

One corner of the room is overgrown with rotted plants. No indication of water supply to cause such brown mulch. Will have assistants remove the compost as it gives a terrible impression of a festering bug carcass.

Remove this later: White Palace servants could not sustain plants.

[...] King's previous architect indulged in the following: twenty by seventy pillars, pristine white, specialized to [2]. Question arises where, how to position furniture in such a way as [2] attributes benefits the pupal stage of the asset? Previous architect established Cradle sixteen feet from the doorway to allow dissipation or interruption of external stimuli before reaching the larva. Cradle is ovular with slimy interior to keep grub contained, composed of an artisan-design from Uppers.

2. Refract light? Refractory. Seems this brood mother wanted her grub raised in light. Feel like that's counterproductive to a grub's nature to hide itself in the deepest hole it can find, but what does a scholar know about this.

[...] artisan chipped bottom of Cradle in clean incision: bite-mark? Am sending to workshop for immediate repairs. Will escalate priority: Lake run-off dripped into bedrock over, presumably, thousand million years time [3]. Continual rainfall must be diverted or else inflict great damage to the rooftop. Arrangement of sewer canals remind this one of a larva's sandcastles: disorganized & with proclivity to collapse. May consult His Grand Highness on extending construction into the system for total restructure as organized by this one.

3. This is grub-spittle. Absolute snail slime. Just wrong. Will this blasted debate just end already? The Blue Lake was not here for a thousand or hundred or million, et al. Writer of this journal is an idiot.

Having trouble with saws & drills to expand castle tunnels into bedrock. Metal keeps warping & cannot endure continual use over [4] ore.

4. Pale? Pure? I keep wanting to write 'cleansed' but translation doesn't roll off the mandible that cleanly.

May the King keep us in His Sight.

2.

1:30 pm. King's workshop measures the width of two rooms; sloppily stitched together by abhorrent design. Visible seam marks exist where white-painted obsidian rock connects with the true Pale surface. One cellar door exists, half-concealed by research table, leading into a tunnel extending downwards into the archaic basin.

Second entry appears to be a time-skip. Cannot tell how long. Ridiculous amount of adjectives.

SPOT ART BY: Charlie Jpeg

Entire place is an appalling construction for someone of His Majesty's stature. The room imposes a terrible, squeezing sensation of being trapped inside a creature's gullet: the wall's ribbed surfaces give any individual, upon walking through it, the subconscious illusion of the place contracting around them. I myself experienced a wild & disquieting feeling when measuring the diameters of the room.

Didn't say as much in front of his Pale Majesty.

13:40 pm. Had five assistants bring in a bedrock drill. Will be firing the five assistants. Scratches & black viscus now line the Pale floor from sloppy work & no foresight to clean said drill.

I know that Feeling.

At least now I have an excuse to replace the white-painted floor with true Pale.

What is true Pale? How is it better than that of obsidian? ...scratch that – obsidian painted white must be the worst waste of paint to ever happen in Hallownest.

Gullet sensation still persists & grows heavier as fantasy the longer one stays within the room. Will I have to ask [5] to cleanse the area? His Highness seems unaffected. Maybe it's a case of nerves.

5. Royal shaman???

15:46 pm. New companion to replace His Majesty's supervision. Stands the length of mantis-kin with the brutish strength of a beetle. Pale armour clad, with attuned weapon.

Mantis-kin. Implies internal knowledge of the King's Foreign relationships. High ranking guy. Still an idiot.

Soot layers its shoulders from working with the others on the drill.

What type of bug is this? Might be a beetle From Foreign lands. Still, records would show that & those I have within my library.

I fear it. It does not speak. It hardly breathes -- the only indication of inhalation is the rattling of its armour & even then, is it moving, or breathing? The King gave it orders to oversee & fulfill my needs.

Odd.

I have hardly asked for its assistance.

17:34 pm. Catastrophe. Bedrock drill hit a vein of black viscus from the archaic basin & now the floor is flooded in a thin layer of it.

From a thin layer, all assistants have been lost??? What, who did you hire, mender-bugs?

All assistants have been lost.

[...] gods. I can hardly write this down, but if I do not, I fear I may grow mad. It does not breathe. Why ought it? It has nothing of a bug's features: nothing but a formless protoplasm wiggling from black-stained armour into a lake of ink-waste. I called for it to return, if it was Alright & by Wyrm, it Listened: it ripped itself from beneath the drill and staggered, and when I saw It --!

Return to later.

Beautiful. What intelligence, what persistence. Agglutinations of bubbling cells sharpened into form & so loyal; each step towards me staining the floor, dripping, festering blot of a creature; and yet it kept stepping forward! And yet it listened; King, it listened!

I redressed its gauntlets once the floor drained viscous back to hence it came. Piece by piece. The feeling of its flexible, malleable form still stains my hands & I wonder if I will be able to ever clean it from me.

My King, you have saved me again! You & your marvelous creations!

3.

I can't stop hearing it.

It grinds like incessant claws. Whirring, whirring. Like a grating of cobblestone down my mandibles, the maddening buzz of tungsten carbide, serrated, replaceable teeth for easier use. I've rebuilt everything in this Palace now & as if grateful, She speaks softly Her warnings to me -- to me, o to me! Where to stand. What to avoid. Not all are so lucky to hear Her voice. Some have lost antennas or themselves when wandering Her halls; clean cuts, skewered, all gone. All fading from my view. A snap & then the blade whistles down the corridor & fades: as if never there. The halls stretch on like dreams.

Return to later.

Return to later.

Remove this note — this bug is stark raving mad.

Remove this note: The author must be stark raving mad. Even I'm a loner and my library isn't speaking to me.

Saw-blades? Buzz-saws? Translator's note: must be a vivid hallucination. Construction buzz-saws cannot just fade out of reality as if a dream.

Like dreams. Hah! No. This must be a dream

FRAGMENTS OF THE PALACE; CORRIDORS OF PALE
COME MORNING, WE WILL CARRY OUR DUST TO THE WIND,
DRIFT DRIFT DRIFT
FORGET BLOTTED INK; FORGOT THE WHITE PEN;
WHERE WE GO SHALL BE CUT
CUT
// CUT

Memories of our dreams, in them, in my beautiful King's creation; oh, mercy, how my hands are still stained!

I think I am followed.

4.

THE ACHROMATIC,
ODOURLESS,
FEATURELESS
PALE,
EATS
THE SURROUNDINGS,
THE BUZZ
THE BUZZ,
A HIVE OF WHITE:
DREAMS UPON DREAMS
MY KING:
WHEN THE INK DRIES IN THE ANNALS OF OUR HISTORY,
WORDS GIVE IT MEANING --
BUT WHAT OF THE WHITE PAGES?

WHO READS WHAT THEY SAY?

This seems written in the style of the monument's within Hallownest. Perhaps architect designed that knight outside of my door. Remove this note: shame he seems out of wits. He made good work.

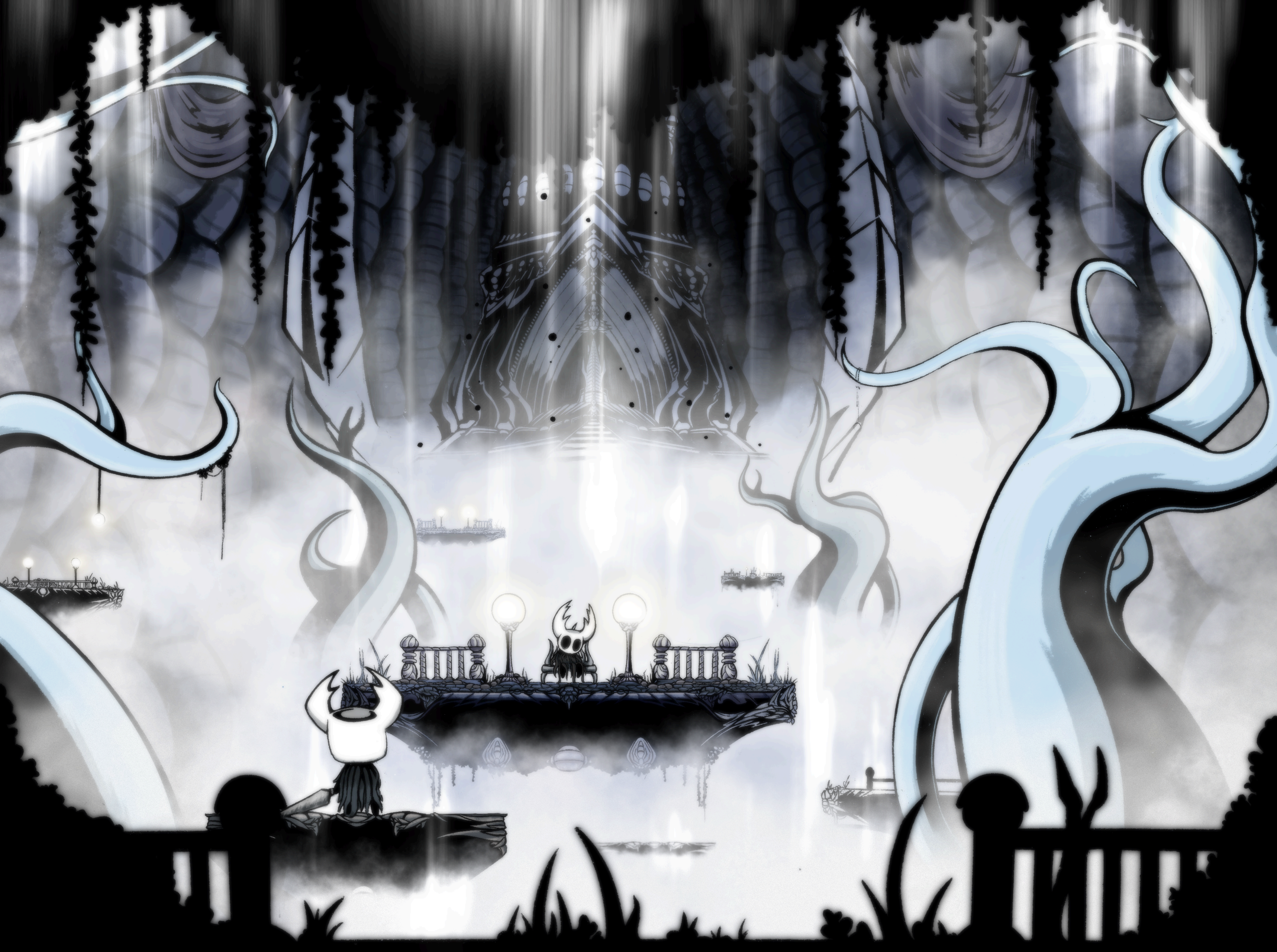
Yeah, he's mad.

This entire entry is written in the corner of a page, extremely small as if the person wanted to preserve the blank tome. The obsidian-stone of which it is carved on has been painted white in layers that strip away in chunks if you do not handle it carefully.

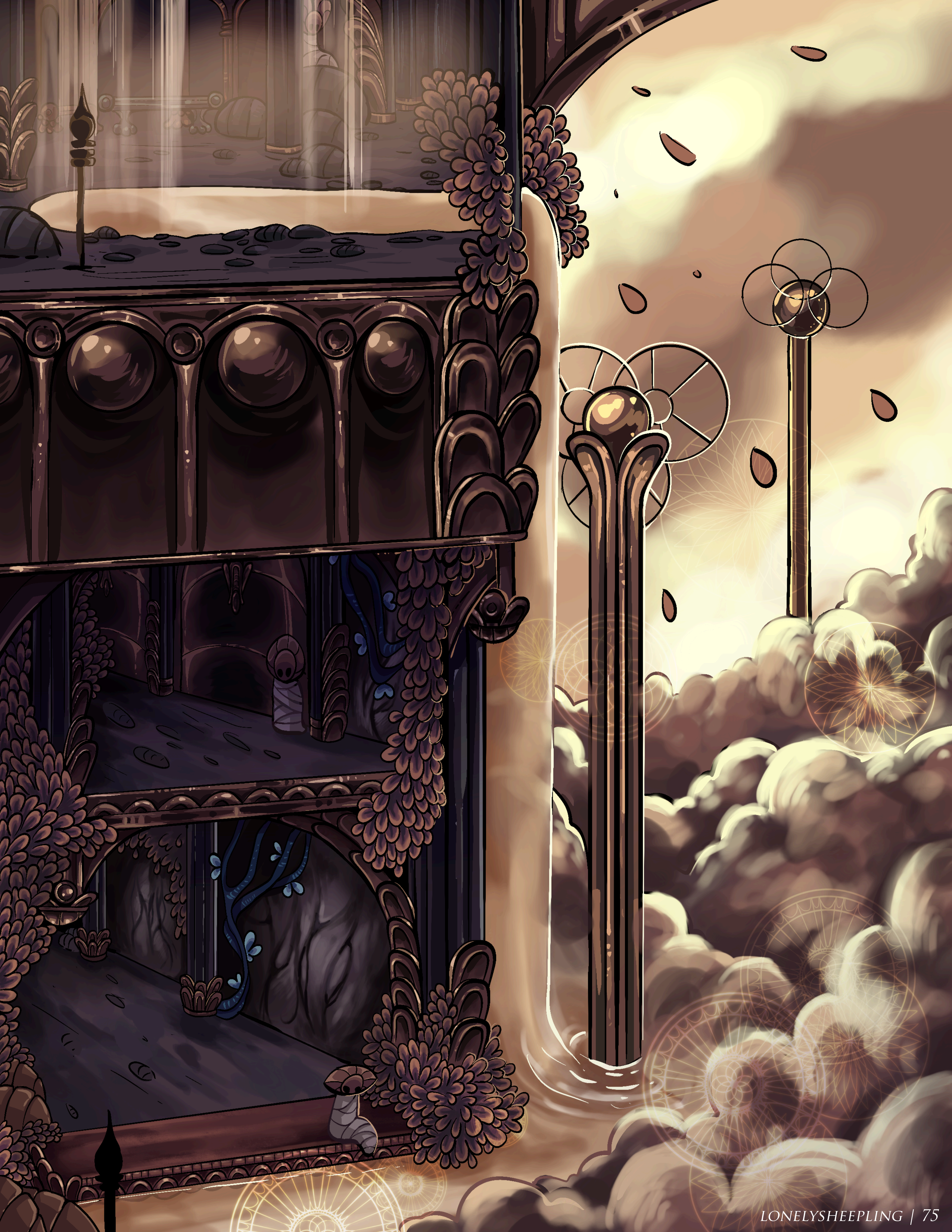
Translator's note: What is the buzz? Is this a reference to the loudest of the Palace? Or is it something else?

Translator's note: White pages...?

Translator's note: What a bunch of grub spittle these tomes turned out to be. Glad to know the castle lumafly wrote this: just as inanely charged.



VatsOfGoop



@scarfsfx

* * *

They hum an aimless tune, basking in the warmth of their goddess.

“Pleasant day today is it not?” Their companion inquires, who then moves to sit down beside them, spreading out its wings to catch that heat.

“Her light is as warm as ever.” They agree, sighing with content.

When they both fall silent for a time, they begin to fiddle with the plants that poke through the architecture. Delightfully stubborn. Untamable.

“Do you ever think of the extinguished land?” It suddenly questions, perhaps an attempt to bring back up conversation.

“Oh of course.” They confirm. “But I think they call it Hallownest these days.”

“Same thing. Though, I do miss it sometimes.”

“It's a curious place nowadays, I've glimpsed it before.” They pause, thinking. “It's much more diverse than before. Or, well, it was I suppose. Distinct regions where smaller gods took hold under the light of that silver god. The rage of our goddess has decimated quite a lot of that variety, empty homes without people.”

“What do you think of it all?” It questions, leaning forward slightly to look at them.

“Hallownest? Or the pestilence that plagues it?”

“Both, I suppose.” It looks out over the clouds again. “Our land, stolen from us by a greedy god. Most of our people turned against the goddess that lovingly raised us. But the people who settled in after that- they did nothing to deserve any of it. I don't even think they knew they lived on stolen grounds. So many lives, agonized and wasted. I just don't think it's fair.”

They think about this for a little while. “I don't think she's really mad at the inhabitants. She's mad because the person who actually slighted her is untouchable. So she lashes out at whatever she can reach. I wonder what will happen when her plague claims the remaining survivors?”

“Who knows. But it doesn't exactly paint the most benevolent picture of her. I worry, sometimes. Especially of that new wielder.”

“The silenced one of her adversary and the silver god? A peculiar sight indeed. I wonder what it intends to do, if anything at all?”

In truth, they've never seen the new wielder for themself. But they've heard whispers of them. Ruthless, efficient from an outsider's perspective. Perhaps a bit more sentimental than one might perceive.

“I wouldn't be surprised if it chose to go after her. I don't know all too much about it, but I'm sure we're both aware that our goddess was not the first god to settle into the nooks and crannies of that kingdom.”

“Certainly not. Though it does make one curious about this other god.”

“I'm sure with any luck we'll find out soon enough.”

They remain silent after this for a time.

“I hope it doesn't kill her.” They say, voice a little smaller. “My feelings on it are a little complicated, but she's kind as she is cruel, a coin with two sides.

It makes an aimless hum of acknowledgment, thinking for a moment. “The container that holds her I think is a small shard of that wielder. Or perhaps one part of a whole, the both of them? Nevertheless, I doubt their goals are too far off. Hope all you wish, but don't be surprised.”

"I know." They sigh, a sort of weight to it. "We wouldn't be here if not for her. Her warmth is pleasant. It's a shame all that's happened. That silver god, this endless war."

"An end is likely on the horizon- and it's not looking in our favor." It confirms. "She cannot fault us, and we are in no place to fault her. Perhaps it's best we move on from this topic, I think it would only upset you."

"Right." They sit up slightly. "On a slightly different topic, have you noticed something about our final kin?"

"The one who carries the burden? What about them?" It inquires.

"Their dreams wander more and more by the passing day. And especially with the new wielder, I believe it reasonable to assume they'll join us soon."

"Hm." Its response is noncommittal, thoughtful perhaps. "Well, we will welcome them with open arms. It's the least we can do for them."

"I wonder what they'll have to say about the world as it is? We only glimpse so much of it- I hope they'll have insights to share."

"I know that our resting grounds lie quiet now. Haunted, but quiet. Peaceful. It's what the deceased deserve."

They make a noise of acknowledgment. "Perhaps it's best that it's laid to rest."

"Perhaps it is best that Hallownest, the mass grave that it is, is all laid to rest."

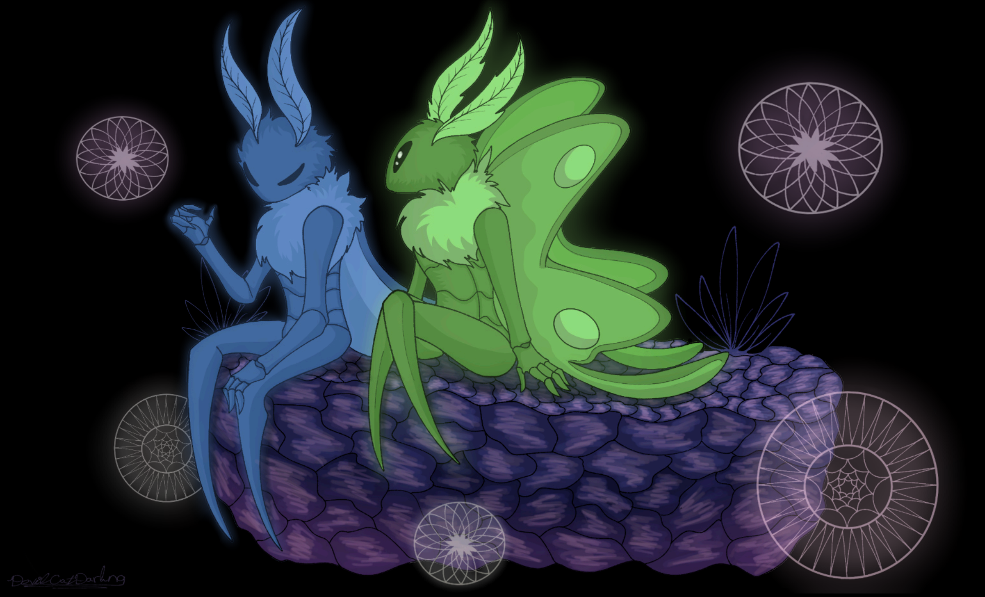
Quiet again for a little while.

"Would you like to take a walk?" Their companion asks, wings fluttering shut as it move to stand up. "It's a nice day. Maybe we can get mother to share a glimpse of the moss god's land."

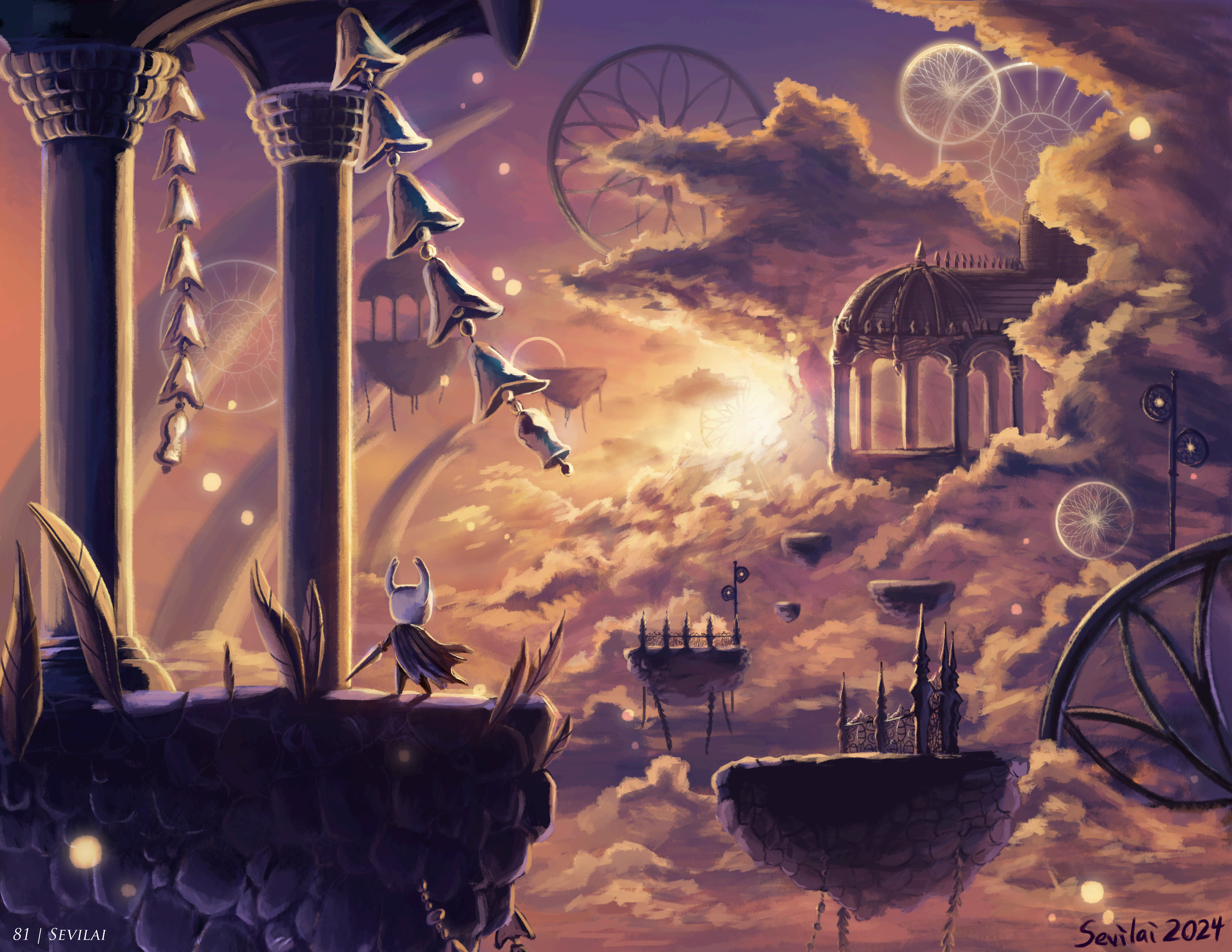
"Do you think she might let us glimpse the lake?"

It offers them a hand to get up that they take. "Maybe if we ask nice. She was always a little more tolerant of her children's presence."

"I think I'd like that." Their hand lingers a moment in it's grip, before they let go. "Let's get going then I suppose."



SPOT ART BY: DevilCatDarling


Sevilai 2024

HALLOW HOME

Thank you for reading!

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